

Bioinformatics policy calls for 51% FDI in govt labs

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In a radical suggestion, a draft National Bioinformatics Policy 2003 of the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) has called for a total revamping of the existing programs. It has also recommended a reorientation of it to become resource oriented from infrastructure generation, and allow 51 percent equity by foreign companies and institutions in government funded research centers.

The backbone of the country's bioinformatics segment is a network of 60 research centers, linked on a high speed computer network called the Biotechnology Information Systems Network (BTISnet). These centers are located in prominent universities, research institutes and academic institutions. Being government funded, these centers have been closed to the private sector and the vast infrastructure was available only for the national scientific community.

The document called the Draft National Bioinformatics Policy 2003, stressed the need to accelerate the pace of the program to enable job creation, resource generation, and output maximization and provide BTIS with a competitive edge over other countries.



And this can happen only with capital formation. To make this happen, the policy recommends:

- Allow foreign institutional investors, MNCs and academic establishments to invest in any chosen bioinformatics center with a ceiling of 51 per cent of equity.
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Allow foreign pharmaceuticals companies to outsource bioinformatics centers in all areas other than those of strategic relevance

- Encourage major international bioinformatics institutions like the NCBI (National Center for Bioinformatics), USA, EBI (European Bioinformatics Institute) UK, DDBJ, Japan and SIB etc, to open offshore centers using the infrastructure of the BTIS centers.
- Allow leading technology companies to invest in technology upgradation schemes with the bioinformatics centers.

To facilitate these steps, the policy has also recommended the setting up of an independent autonomous institution, the Product Management Center of the bioinformatics program with control over the existing network.

The policy paper has suggested that all resources of BTIS should be considered as national resources in higher education and made available to the entire scientific community. It has suggested evolving an integration protocol and ensures the resources are made available through a common portal. The portal should consist of, apart from factual data, utility services required for research, teaching and practices.

Admitting that the government's bioinformatics program lacks the required level of interaction with the emerging bioinformatics industry, the policy has called for several collective steps such as:

- Develop an industry-institution partnership program both at national level and at central level
- Understanding the industry environment and market environment through techno-market surveys
- Inventorying the transferable technologies available within the BTIS network and making them available in the public domain
- Promote the growth of business incubators in the field of bioinformatics
- Provision for industrial and entrepreneurial consultancy services
- Encourage enterprise creation through liberalized flow of foreign capital, outsourcing, infrastructure generation etc.
- Adequate emphasis on human resource development that suits the requirement of the industries
- Promotion and protection on intellectual property rights.

The government expects a national debate on the draft policy. While the draft policy is an important step in stimulating debate, despite its industry-oriented suggestions, there are several gaps.

First, the policy has a limited view of the bioinformatics segment. It has failed to recognize the fact that the bioinformatics sector has today grown beyond the confines of government-funded laboratories. Perhaps, the policy's vision has been restricted to the DBT-funded operations. Essentially, it has failed to look beyond DBT's nose.

Second, the policy has no solutions to offer to the problems faced by the fast emerging private industry in bioinformatics. This sector is targeting global pharma players for providing them services. It is, however, stymied by the high cost of proprietary tools. Also, the lack of a national policy on promoting the development of human resources with defined quality is hampering the growth of the industry.

Overall, recognizing even the shortcomings of the existing bioinformatics is a welcome sign, it would be appropriate if the final policy casts its net wide to ensure the emergence of a vibrant bioinformatics industry, rivaling the successful computer software sector.

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