



iGEM Göttingen 2012
iGEM2012@uni-goettingen.de

Anschrift:

Georg-August-Universität Göttingen
z. H. Prof. Dr. Heinz Neumann
GZMB, Molecular Structural Biology
Dept. of Applied Synthetic Biology
Justus-von-Liebig-Weg 11
37077 Göttingen

Open letter concerning “Biotechnology in our day’s society“

Dear members of parliament, dear Dr. Schavan,

Dear members of the country council, dear Mrs. Wanka,

We are 12 junior scientists attending the master program “Microbiology and Biochemistry” at the University of Göttingen. We take part in this year’s iGEM competition and as part of our work we interviewed people about their perception and opinion of Synthetic Biology and genetic engineering in general. To this end, we generated a survey that has been answered by over 300 participants. The survey’s results were later presented and discussed at an information evening together with experts from science, journalism, bioethics and industry.

Firstly, we wanted to know how well the public is acquainted with the fields Synthetic Biology and genetic engineering. Furthermore, we were interested in society’s attitude towards these topics and trust in science. Through asking selective questions we aimed to assess the amount of previous knowledge. Thereupon we were able to evaluate our further questions in relation to the corresponding level of information.

The survey shows that the majority of interviewees can place biological terms correctly. However, most of them felt like they were not informed on scientific topics as well as they could have been. The results suggested that the internet represent the primary source of information. As a neutral source, the internet platform “biotechnologie.de” (Initiative of “Federal Ministry of Education and Research”) is already established; however our experience shows that it is widely unknown. Introducing impartial information sources that are accessible throughout the general public would possibly take the edge off of current topics like “Danger from genes” in the food industry. We discussed at length whether the responsibility of spreading info on the subject lies with politics, the industry or even

educational institutions like universities or schools. We came to the conclusion that scientists and students, which are arguably at the primary stage of information generation, may be able to inform the public with governmental support in an objective way. One could, for example, organize information booths and meetings as all German iGEM teams have done on the "Synthetic Biology Day". Financial support and a central organization could help realize those projects.

Now coming to the next big issue, trust in science, which is generally there, but there are differences concerning genetic engineering in food, dependent on age groups. As may have been expected there is a significant difference between the younger and older generations with respect to dealing with genetic engineering in everyday life. Generally speaking, younger participants are better informed and more prone to accepting and using genetically engineered products. Moreover, our survey clearly indicates that education and acceptance of genetic engineering correlate!

Lastly, one big point of discussion was whether or not a labeling of genetically engineered food or other products that are produced via biotechnological processes makes sense or not. The majority of interviewees come down in favor of a labeling of these products. From our point of view, an impartial education is able to take away fear of scientifically unfounded risks.

With this letter we aim to show the public attitude towards Synthetic Biology and genetic engineering and, more importantly, where we see chances and possibilities to put these topics into focus.

We have tried to contribute to public relations by organizing our own information meeting. Feel free to visit our homepage <http://2012.igem.org/Team:Goettingen>. Additionally, you can find out more about this year's iGEM competition here: http://2012.igem.org/Main_Page.

Sincerely,

The iGEM team Göttingen

Bianca Genencher, Berit Haßing, Alicia Illen, Jan Kampf, Sandra Keiper, Anna Köhler, Corinna Krüger, Leonhard Nagel, Nikolas Rakebrandt, Patrick Reinke, Jan Erik Schliep, Simon Uhse