



Queensland Academy  
of Arts and Sciences

## **The Queensland Academy of Arts and Sciences: A Biographical History.**

As told by Dr John O'Hagan AM

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2010 QAAS Council: Dr John O'Hagan (centre back).

The history of the Queensland Academy of Arts and Sciences extends to well before the inaugural launch in September 2000. The life of the Academy's founder, Dr John O'Hagan, is filled with experiences which merge the arts and sciences in innovative ways. From the opening of the Sir Thomas Brisbane Planetarium in 1978 to projects for the Queensland Museum, his life experiences have been foundational in his quest to establish a new Academy amidst a stubborn academic world.

#### Prelude:

The idea started to form from a number of experiences Dr O'Hagan had with academics and societies, locally and worldwide. He was familiar with the benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration and began to see a need for an academy or society which could facilitate this in Queensland.

In May 1974, the Queensland Festival of the Arts was held in Brisbane. The first of its kind in the Sunshine State, this festival brought together a wide range of arts and technology, celebrating and sharing the stories and potential of each. One of the Festival organisers asked Dr O'Hagan to participate in the organising committee, which he accepted enthusiastically. He had oversight of seven different segments, titled SCIART, which utilised technology to bring together the arts and sciences in public displays. Scattered around the Central Business District of Brisbane, the Festival included exhibits such as Computer Composers which featured IT artists demonstrating their computer-generated music and images. This exhibit offered the public an opportunity to experiment and make their own computer art. The Queensland Festival of the Arts served as a lightning rod to signal the start of the journey towards establishing a Queensland Academy.



Program from the 1974 Queensland Festival of the Arts.

In 1983, there was another first – the Interlink 1 Symposium: Integrating Art, Science and Technology. Held in the Brisbane City Hall, this symposium was the first of its kind in Queensland which brought together experts from a variety of disciplines to 'identify cultural connections'. The event was sponsored by the Queensland Division of ANZAAS, the Royal Society of Queensland, and the Queensland College of Art.

Three questions were to be discussed during the event. Firstly: Are there more connections among the arts, the sciences and technology than is generally recognised? Secondly: Does each make appropriate and sufficient use of advances in the others? and finally: Do linkages



Interlink 1 Symposium  
1983.

across the arts, the sciences and technology lead to new ways of thinking creativity and acting collaboratively?

To address these questions, four sessions were held. Consisting of speakers and displays, followed by panel discussions, three sessions focused on art, science, technology, with a fourth session bringing together the thoughts and findings from each. This symposium formed a major point of inspiration for Dr O'Hagan as he served as the convener for the event and recognised the obvious potential for connections among the disciplines. A number of people involved in the event later became involved in the formation of the QAAS and members of the Academy.

In Dr O'Hagan's 30-odd years in the Royal Society of Queensland, he began to identify the need for a broader focus. He was President of the Society for a period, as well as a Board member and well-respected among his peers. In the 1980s, the Royal Society had an exclusive focus on the natural sciences, with its publications and events focusing around this topic. In his last two years of membership, Dr O'Hagan began suggesting to the Society that they embrace a broader range of topics for discussion and promotion, beginning with the other

sciences. The Board of the Society weren't fond of the idea, persisting with a focus on the natural sciences with their publications and events. Dr O'Hagan continued to advocate for this broader vision, but to no avail. As time passed however, the Royal Society did expand its scope to a number of other sciences, but not before Dr O'Hagan had left to begin discussions around the formation of a new Society.

Unable to persuade the Royal Society of Queensland to expand its focus to other sciences, let alone the arts, Dr O'Hagan embarked on the long journey which would lead to the formation of the Queensland Academy of Arts and Sciences. His ambition was to create an Academy with a broad focus; one which bridged the arts and the sciences, not restricting itself to either and which forged connections between them and their experts. In this, he also hoped to connect ideas with the resources to make them work, opening dialogue between disciplines and individuals to create a culture around innovation and transformation. When he proposed the idea to his contacts in Victoria, he was told, 'That kind of thing would never work down here in Melbourne'. Despite this, Dr O'Hagan decided, 'Well, Brisbane isn't Melbourne!' Fuelled by determination, he continued on his journey to establish the Academy.

In 1994, Mr Robert Johnson had organised a symposium titled *Queensland: The State of Science*, whose steering committee was composed of Dr John O'Hagan, Mr Hamish Bain, Dr Robert Johnston, Professor Peter Sheehan, and Mr Kevin Sidell. It was this steering

committee which developed the primary mission and objectives for the development of the Academy.

Mr Matt Foley MLA, the Minister for Employment, Training and Industrial Relations at the time was advised of the objectives of the proposed Academy. Mr Foley responded well, providing vital support for the project, both financially and publicly. He was able to link the committee to a number of other influential and instructive people.

By 1997, an interim committee had been formed to oversee the establishment of the Academy and to develop its strategic plan.

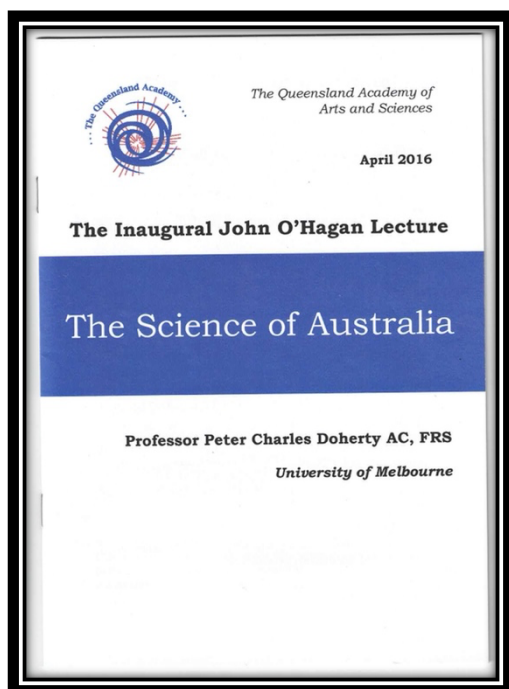
The project continued to grow. Dr O'Hagan and his colleagues met with many prominent people from a wide range of disciplines and organisations to test the water and gain support for the formation of the Academy. They gathered information from a number of published materials from organisations and academies which had broader foci than the Royal Society, such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science, various State academies, the Royal Society of Edinburgh in Scotland, and the Royal Hibernian Society of Ireland, just to name a few. In researching these academic organisations, Dr O'Hagan and his colleagues' vision to form a like organisation in Queensland was reinforced – a place where experts could gather and celebrate diversity. They were able to gain insight into the workings and structures of these academies, using them to build a scaffold for the Queensland Academy.

Of special note are the Royal Society of New Zealand and the Japan Academy. Of the Japan Academy, Dr O'Hagan explained that, in his experience, continental Academies tend to have a broader range of disciplines involved in their operation. He visited the headquarters in Tokyo and was able to collect pamphlets and other information relating to the organisation of the Academy, which he used as reference material for the formation of the QAAS.

Fellows from The Royal Society of New Zealand (RSNZ) were a close contact and support throughout this process, generously supplying information about their Society's mission and structure. This Society served as inspiration due to its successful multi-disciplinary focus, particularly its engagement with the arts. The RSNZ even administer the distribution of arts grants for the New Zealand Government. Dr O'Hagan has visited the Society a number of times and retained a close relationship with them. In 1998, he met with Mr Ross Moore, the Chief Executive Officer of the Society at the time, to gain insights into the work they were doing. Dr O'Hagan was gifted a Maori bone carving of the Society's logo, which he wrote in an email of thanks would 'remain an appreciated souvenir'. He was able to visit RSNZ branches around New Zealand and discuss how the distributed system worked, in the hope of one day forming branches of the QAAS in areas of Queensland outside of the South-East corner.

#### Picking up Speed:

In early 2000, Dr O'Hagan learned that Nobel Prize winner Professor Peter Doherty was returning to Australia. Dr O'Hagan persuaded him to come to Brisbane to speak in support of



Program from the Inaugural John O'Hagan Lecture 2016.

the Academy. The steering committee charged with advancing the formation of the Academy contacted many influential people to garner support for and additional views on the structure of the Academy. These people included several distinguished academics and professionals, associates of the Royal Society of Queensland, University Chancellors and eminent businessmen and women.

Throughout this consultation period, overwhelming support for the formation of the Academy was noted. 'No one in Queensland said it was a bad idea', Dr O'Hagan explained. Many letters of support for the formation of the Academy from a wide variety of people, were received. Excerpts from these letters were used in formal proposals to the then-government and potential corporate supporters.

The Academy's original office was at the home of Dr O'Hagan in Annerley. Fortunately, due to the steering committee's continuous efforts, the Academy received a grant of \$20,000 from Queensland Premier, Mr Peter Beattie and later, Mr John Petty Manager of Ionide Pty Ltd, a Brisbane-based chemical engineering company involved in hydro technology, gave \$1000 in support of the project. Combined, this generous financial assistance allowed the QAAS logo to be registered, the procurement of legal and financial advice, and the payment of the many other expenses associated with the formation of the Academy.

The Queensland Government provided further support to the nascent Academy during this period including a furnished and fitted-out office space in the inner city (with carparking). They were able to occupy this and a similar office in the Lands Department Building for a few years.

The designing of the logo for the Academy was one of the first things to be settled. Well-known Queensland artist, Mr John Rigby, was recruited to design the logo as he had been involved in the logo design for both The Festival of the Arts and the Interlink 1 Symposium. Mr Rigby's design, consisting of interlinking circles shot through with multiple straight lines, represents the creation and compilation of diverse ideas and concepts, and their distribution via multiple channels and disciplines. The final design was sent to a company named Quantum, which digitised and animated the image.

The organisation's name was originally to be The Queensland Academy, but Dr O'Hagan explains that it didn't place sufficient emphasis on the Academy's true purpose. Hence, the Queensland Academy of Arts and Sciences was conferred with the early steering committee and new QAAS Council in furious agreement. The QAAS motto took a little more time. The

first Council worked through a few different iterations before deciding on ‘Thinking – Acting Together’.

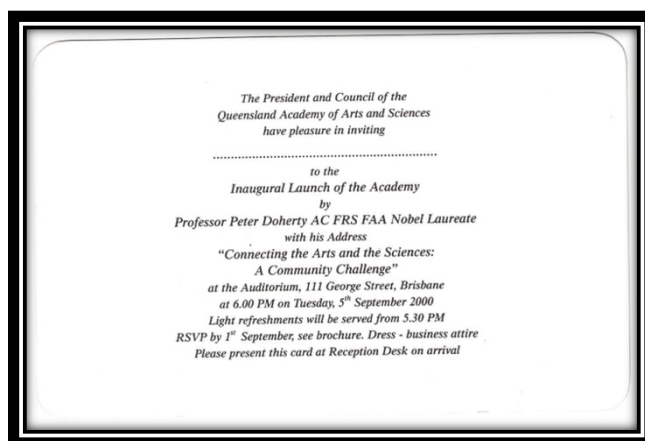
Now that the Academy had a name, a Council, a logo and a motto, it was officially ready for its launch.

#### Launch:

The Launch of the Queensland Academy of Arts and Sciences wasn’t a long or crowded affair. Held in George Street, Brisbane, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of September 2000, the Academy was officially launched by Professor Peter Doherty.

Many of those who had participated throughout the planning process were invited, as well as a number of University Vice Chancellors, Senior Deputy Vice Chancellors, and other representatives from local Universities. His Excellency

Major General Peter Arnison, AO Governor of Queensland happily accepted the invitation to, not only attend the event, but to become a patron of the Academy for the remainder of his term.



Invitation to the 2000 Launch of the Academy.

Prof. Peter Doherty opened the event, speaking of the interesting times that were unfolding. As technology changed with the millennium, there came a need for collaboration. He described the QAAS as having the ‘potential to be a powerful force for the future well-being of this community’.

For the logo reveal, the Academy had commissioned a media company to animate the design. A laptop was rented so the image would be projected onto a large screen. The Queensland Governor had the task of activating the animation, and the pieces of the new logo all swirled around to an orchestral theme before coalescing into shape on screen. There was applause – it was an impressive technological feat, combining the arts and sciences once again. Dr O’Hagan began his explanation of the image, when he was interrupted by the logo of the company, they had rented the laptop from. Dr O’Hagan commented, ‘As Napoleon said, “Always expect the unexpected”’. Fortunately, Dr O’Hagan’s son was able to stop the projection before everything went too far off the rails - an entertaining, if unexpected, turn of events.

The inaugural QAAS Council of the Academy consisted of many people who had been involved in the project for some time and had been on initial steering committee linked to the 1994 *Queensland: The State of Science* symposium and members the interim committee which preceded the formation of the QAAS Council.



22. ORIGINAL MEMBERSHIP OF THE COUNCIL

Notwithstanding anything else contained in this Constitution:

- a) until the first election of the Council under this Chapter at the Annual General Meeting in 2001 the Council shall consist of:

James More Bain

Thomas Blair Connor

Elizabeth Anne Byrne Henderson

Cherrell Hirst

Robert William Johnson

John Edward O'Hagan

Susan Mary Kiefel

Glenn Charles Martin

Roger Dennis Scott

and such other persons as are appointed under (b) below,

The nine original members of the Academy Council.

The Academy produced a brochure which clearly outlined their aims and objectives, as well as the various ways members were able to join.

The Premier of the day Peter Beattie referred the Academy to the then Department of Arts and Technology. They provided a monetary grant which allowed the Academy to recruit essential administrative staff. After this, however, it seemed as though no one was interested in funding the work of the Academy, with their mission being across the remit of the arts, humanities, technology and science but not exclusively belonging to a single domain. Much time was spent in these early years attempting to become registered as Deductible Gift Recipient entity allowing it to then receive tax-deductible gifts. It seemed that every time the organisation got close to achieving this, the Government would change the criteria or application process and they would have to start all over again.

When asked about considering attaching the Academy to a University, Dr O'Hagan responded that had no thought of doing such a thing. Personally, he's remained disinclined to the idea, related to the priority Universities hold to the publication of peer-reviewed work. He wanted to create an impartial platform for anyone with a worthwhile publication to be afforded the opportunity for it to be promoted. He also wanted to ensure that ideas, opinions and initiatives were welcome from all people and sectors including, but not limited to, Universities. In his experience, many great inventions such as the plastic microchip and cinema projectors, have come from outside University contexts.

#### Academy Years:

In its first year, the Academy held two lectures and a full day symposium. The first in April of 2001 was given by Prof. Roger Kitching and Emeritus Prof. Ian Lowe, entitled 'Do we have a future? Sustainability, Science, Technology and Ethics'. Professors Kitching and Lowe spoke of the current and future relationships with nature and technology, with a focus on sustainability. The second lecture was given by the Hon. Justice Michel Kirby, a long-

term supporter of the Academy, in June of 2001. Entitled 'Ethics and Genetic Discrimination', Justice Kirby spoke of the ethical issues regarding DNA modification, a topic he was well-qualified to speak to, being a previous President of the International Commission of Jurists, a member of the UNESCO International Bioethics Committee and an elected member of the Ethics Committee of the Human Genome Organisation. Justice Kirby moderated a panel-like discussion with a group of young students as a part of the event, and Dr O'Hagan said everyone's obvious enjoyment and passion from participating on the panel 'justified the work they put into the event'.

A third event, entitled 'Innovation in the Visual Arts' consisted of two parts. The first was a half-day workshop presented by Gilbert Reidelbauch, Mike Naylor, Sam Bucolo and Nathan Chan in October 2001 entitled 'Rapid Prototyping for Sculptors and Designers' followed by a full day symposium in November of the same year entitled 'Innovation in the Visual Arts'. The Academy hit the ground running with these first three major events, laying the foundations for the next twenty years.

Dr John O'Hagan was President of the Academy for the first three years. He remained on the Council of the Academy for 10 years before retiring to continue other work. Mr Hamish Bain continued to keep the ball rolling, managing the affairs, especially financial, of the Academy and helping it to continue to expand.

Since those early years the Academy has continued to grow. It has partnered with a number of organisations to hold events, lectures, symposiums and conferences which bring together professionals from a variety of fields. One such partnership was with RiverSymposium in 2003 and 2004, in which the Academy collaborated with RiverFestival Brisbane to host the event. With an attendance of 375 delegates from 29 countries, the symposium was comprised of a variety of events from plenary sessions to workshops being both social and academic in focus. The QAAS contributed a number of panellists and a workshop to the event in 2003.

In 2005, the Academy developed a major partnership with KPMG to finalise the Academy's strategic plan and develop future documents. They also formed a partnership with an Arts Queensland Creative Industries Precinct (CIP) organisation, Ausdance QLD, to host regular events. In this year, the Academy's website was reconstructed to become more interactive, as well as inviting new members to the QAAS Council to diversify its membership. Strategic planning documents were compiled during this period to chart a path for the Academy into the future.

In 2016, the Council approached Dr O'Hagan and asked if they could name an annual lecture after him. He agreed, and every year since, the John O'Hagan Lecture has been held. The first, in 2016, was given by Nobel Prize winner Professor Peter Doherty entitled, 'The Science of Australia'. The most recent lecture was held in May of this year, 2021. Given by Queensland's Chief Scientist, Prof Hugh Possingham, it was entitled 'Stories about where maths and conservation meet policy: Triage, koalas, offsetting and rezoning the Great Barrier Reef'.

The Academy also holds an Annual Dinner at the Queensland Cricketers' Club, with a guest speaker and ample networking opportunities for members. Along with its bi-monthly Council



meetings, the Academy convenes for its Annual General Meeting, where all members are invited to contribute to the business and future plans of the Academy.

#### Into the Future:

The founders' vision for a Queensland Academy has come to fruition, but the work doesn't stop there. Its founders envisioned this Academy as a place where members of all disciplines, ages and backgrounds could gather and explore ideas. Publications, symposiums and other events will continue to connect people. Soon, the Academy plans to establish regional branches in towns with Universities thereby further diversifying its membership base. There is much to look forward to in the future, both in thinking together and acting together.