

RiAus: what we intend to do...

The RiAus takes its inspiration from the Royal Institution of Great Britain, founded over 200 years ago by a group including Joseph Banks, then President of the Royal Society, with a view to providing greater public outreach for science and its applications and to encouraging broader use of the benefits offered by new technology. Briefly, “We bring Science to the People and People to Science.”

Given that RiAus, as a fully independent charitable body, has received powerful and tangible support from the South Australian Government, Santos and, most recently, \$15m from the Commonwealth Government, I welcome this opportunity to explain our mission in more detail.

As the name proclaims, RiAus is committed to being a national resource and to achieve this we must maintain an international science presence. Our Council, chaired by Peter Yates, has powerful advocacy from around the nation, Sir Rod Eddington, Catherine Livingstone, Martyn Myer, Professor John Yovich, Professor Max Brennan, and internationally, Baroness Susan Greenfield, Javier Moll and a group of some 20 truly outstanding Australian-based scientists is joining us in a distinguished category of honorary membership. The challenge is to build an enterprise special to our region, our time and our culture, yet drawing upon a rich heritage.

The physical location will be the iconic Stock Exchange Building in Adelaide, purchased and refurbished by the SA Government as the Science Exchange, to be opened on 8th October this year. There will be an emphasis on state of art AV and IT technology through cooperation with industry partners and the institution is forging links with sister organizations throughout Australia.

So what will we actually do? Two important linked strands concern raising scientific awareness and lifting the level of debate on issues arising from science and technology. Through “Science Outside the Square”, part of the Bragg Initiative of the SA Government, we have developed expertise in having practising scientists share their excitement and commitment with audiences in a relaxed environment

and in, perhaps, surprising people that new and interesting science is very close to their everyday lives. The RiAus will also develop programs, general and specific, which discuss the science underpinning some new development or challenge and which go on to tackle the ethical and risk consequences. This can be in the form of boardroom briefings, discussion sessions for public servants and meetings for opinion formers.

I believe that, in a society dependent on science and technology, every citizen has a right and an obligation to be informed. This is best achieved in the broad cultural space, so that science sits with theatre, literature, art, music and sport. The RiAus is actively seeking cultural relationships of an appropriate kind.

The Institution has a special commitment to youth. This will be done through direct programs and also programs which provide enrichment resources to schools and teachers. Naturally we will be concerned about encouraging career path choice in science and technology but consistent with the holistic philosophy outlined earlier the RiAus seeks to reach also

those students who will choose some other career but who deserve some exposure to science.

In delivering sustainable programs in all of the above areas we seek to involve scientists (including, of course, engineers and mathematicians) directly as far as possible rather than to engage

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intermediary spokespersons.

It is clear that RiAus must be heavily engaged in the scientific and education communities. We have no ambition to engage directly in research nor, for that matter, in curriculum development but intend to play a strong facilitative role. There will be opportunities to bring researchers in contact and thus to encourage new collaborations.

Being linked also with business and industry it is natural to seek to assist with the networking which brings science from laboratory through to commercial development. I am personally particularly concerned by the fragility of existing mechanisms which bring ideas through the ‘proof of concept’ phase. More

generally I believe that our independent status allows the RiAus to make a constructive contribution to development from Australia’s scientific base.

Progressively the RiAus can develop a ‘think-tank’ capacity. There are several effective organizations of this type recently established in Australia. I think of the Lowy Institute, the Grattan Institute and the US Studies Centre. These tend to be in political or social science. There is also the Global Foundation, of which I am a Board Member, which covers a wide spectrum and tackles many specific projects of both national and international significance.

All major issues which are important to our nation’s and our region’s future, are multidimensional and so cross-cooperation is called for. I have ambitions for the RiAus to contribute here, with a science focus, a solid base in the scientific community and a capacity and willingness to embrace other languages of discourse.

The RiAus is profoundly indebted to those who have shown faith by investing in the vision. In financially difficult times it requires vigour to argue that raising science awareness is a key priority. I believe that the activities of RiAus will deliver tangible benefit to the R&D community, not least by helping to create a broad climate of goodwill but also through practical targeted programs.



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