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Cracks appearing in the foundation

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By [Chris Barton](#)

When Peggy Deamer accepted the job as head of Auckland University's School Of Architecture and Planning she was full of hope. The Ivy League professor was attracted to New Zealand in part because, like many artists and intellectuals, she felt at odds with the Bush era in America.

"New Zealand had a certain appeal – nuclear free, that I'm from California, the Pacific rim connection, and I'm an outdoors person – all that." But more than anything, it was the chance to lead a school of architecture.

"I'd been associate dean at Yale [School of Architecture] for a number of years and assistant dean and I wanted to run a school. When I came here I saw a situation with a lot of potential. It didn't seem stuck – it seemed on the verge of wanting something to happen."

Five months into her role something did happen. Deamer resigned. News of her hurried departure was greeted with dismay by students and staff – the students holding a protest in the school courtyard and 373 signing a letter sent to the University's vice-chancellor.

Deamer told students at an impromptu farewell there was a "deep misalignment" of views between her and the architecture faculty management. Staff and students are asking why Deamer wasn't able to work out her six months notice and why she is no longer allowed on campus.

At the Freeman's Bay house she's renting Deamer struggles to hide her disappointment.. But there is also a sense of defiance. She's not packing her bags for home. She's staying put, at least to the end of the year, and is about to take up a teaching role at Unitec's School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture.

"I'm not going to be persona non grata. I've done nothing wrong."

Why did she leave?

"We disagreed about what was necessary to make a strong school of architecture and planning," is all Deamer will say. "We" is herself and presumably Professor Sharman Pretty – the dean of the oddly named National Institute of Creative Arts Industries (NICAI) faculty that governs dance studies and the schools of music, architecture and town planning, fine arts and visual arts. Ask for more detail and Deamer cites a confidentiality agreement.

Not being able to talk is a common theme of the NICAI story. It happens as the result of an employment dispute settlement, or through staff feeling if they make any criticism of the university, it will be detrimental to their career. Staff and students the Herald spoke to variously describe the situation as a



Professor Peggy Deamer, who resigned from her position as head of Auckland University's architecture school after only five months, to the dismay of students and staff. Photo / Paul Estcourt

"climate of fear", a "climate of cynicism", a "climate of asphyxiation" and a "toxic environment".

What's odd about Deamer's resignation is that the University has given no explanation. All the vice-chancellor and dean will say is that the resignation is regrettable, but in the context of a large organisation such things do happen. A statistical reality.

But it's clear from a stream of letters to the Herald that many are not buying this. The architectural profession has been particularly vocal – concerned that Deamer's resignation is damaging to the school's reputation and will affect its ability to attract similarly high-calibre applicants.

Underlying the profession's reaction is the 2006 National Visiting Panel accreditation report, which decides whether the school's programme is suitable for training architects. While the report did give the school a clean bill of health, it also raised matters needing to be addressed. Among those was the relationship between the school staff and the faculty: "The panel observed a resistance to participate in consultative processes brought about by a perception that contributions to the consultative process were largely ignored. This process has been consultative but not collaborative."

Two of the country's top architects, president of the New Zealand Institute of Architects Ian Athfield and chairman of the Auckland branch Pete Bossley have written to the vice-chancellor, Stuart McCutcheon.

"It's a shame that Peggy has gone," says Bossley. "She seemed to be doing a really good job, making a good link between the profession and academia and to be popular among staff and students." Exactly what's needed for good architecture to happen – widespread collaboration and people able to contribute in supportive, open situations. "You can't teach people to be architects in an environment where they fear speaking out."

Bossley says managerialism is stifling the school. "Managers believe they can manage anything. I don't believe a manager can run an architecture school. You need somebody who understands the culture. I think the problem is the school is being managed into extinction."

Athfield was initially more diplomatic, saying the issue was one for the university. But he too is concerned about the school's reputation. "If I was a parent, four years ago my preference would have been to send my son or daughter to the School of Architecture at Auckland University. If I had the choice today, that would not be my first preference."

The Auckland architecture and planning students are voicing their concerns on the student website Society of Space (www.sos.derail.co.nz). Example: "Professor Deamer is one of a series of well-respected teaching staff that have left the school without any official statements ... the misalignment boils down to incompatible priorities between the faculty management and the school."

A number of students have also written to the *Herald* asking not to be named for "a very real fear of reprisal". They talk about feeling intimidated, marginalised and receiving heavy handed emails. "Why does nobody want the job?" asks one student. "It is because the head of school is incapable of advancing [it] under the constant micromanagement of the dean."

Full-time staff at the school would only speak to the *Herald* on the condition they were not named. They talk of a highly controlling management regime, a culture of blame, being drowned in paperwork, endlessly having to redo proposals, inconsistent information and directions from faculty, being told to do reports a certain way only to be told it wasn't necessary, and being reprimanded on petty details

such as signing forms in the wrong place. Staff say they got the feeling that no matter what they did, it wouldn't be good enough.

There was frustration too that the school had no autonomy – that everything from which visiting lecturers could talk at the school, to the posters advertising a lecture series having to be approved by the faculty first. It seemed as if NICA and the school were in competition. There was talk that faculty management was not happy about the amount of time Deamer was spending in studio.

But for many, it was Deamer's involvement in studio teaching that so impressed. "There was a new spirit in the school," says part-time teacher John Haydn, who was knocked out when he first saw Deamer analyse a student's work.

"She did a great analysis of a very difficult scheme. It's the first time I've seen a head of school do that – the standard of her critiquing was really high."

Deamer says she had been warned about divisions among staff and that many in the Architecture School weren't happy about the recent merger with Planning. But when she took up the reins in February, she was pleasantly surprised. "I found lovely people here and I thought it's not going to be too hard for me. I don't have to get involved in petty histories."

At the time she was positive too about Pretty. "She was the main reason why I took the job – a can-do person. I liked her energy."

Initially she saw the setbacks as a process of learning the New Zealand way, but as time went by she became more disillusioned.

"It was clear we had a dysfunctional relationship. I realised it wasn't helping the school."

McCutcheon and Pretty present a relaxed air of confidence when we meet in the vice-chancellor's office. They have dealt with problems like this before. Pretty says she doesn't know what the "misalignment" Deamer refers to is. "[Deamer] I think found a lot of differences between the system she had come from and the New Zealand system," she says, explaining that the university has a central system for approving programmes. "That can very easily give the impression there's a high level of framework and control and compliance – and to some extent that's true. That was a system that was entirely foreign to Peggy."

Pretty says it's not surprising those things would be frustrating and hard to come terms with. "It was needing to do things in a structured and proscribed framework – I do know she was irritated by some of those things."

McCutcheon agrees: "Because of the resource constraints that operate in New Zealand universities, you don't actually have that much room to make a lot of decisions – we don't have a lot of freedom to operate."

The issue of not working out six months' notice and Deamer's access to campus can't be talked about because of the confidentiality agreement. McCutcheon says requests by staff to allow Deamer back to participate in reviews of students' work are being investigated.

"This process has made me wonder a wee bit whether we aren't somewhat hamstrung by confidentiality

agreements," says McCutcheon, explaining that the normal requirement is that neither the university nor the staff member will disparage each other after the event. But he says having both parties warring in public isn't a good look either.

He agrees, too, that the school's reputation will suffer in the short term.

"The challenge is to build the school's reputation up again. I don't think the reputational effects of these sorts of things are typically very long-lasting. But over time if these things are managed well then they recover. This is not the first time a university in New Zealand has had difficulties of this nature."

The *Herald* asks, as has been raised by some staff, whether it would be significant if staff were to pass a vote of no confidence in faculty management.

"It would be uncommon, but I think it would be particularly unhelpful if we found ourselves in this situation because a lot of the rumour and innuendo that's out there can actually be refuted by the facts of the matter." Both he and Pretty point out they are holding meetings with staff and students to address concerns.

McCutcheon says he's particularly bothered by people trying to join the dots. He's referring to talk of other problems within NICA, at Elam and the School of Music.

One who has made some connections is Helen Charters, president of the Auckland branch of the Association of University Staff. She points to a 2006 morale survey of union staff at NICA which showed low morale, high stress and less collegiality since the formation of the faculty.

McCutcheon and Pretty say the survey sample size and some of the methodology made it unscientific.

Of wider concern is the large number of redundancies and employment disputes that have occurred at the University in the last two years – the bulk of which have been at NICA.

"Our major concern was that decisions about the future of academic disciplines are being made on entirely economic grounds – short term economic grounds," says Charters. Examples include the restructuring of Elam, the closing of the School of Creative and Performing Arts, unjustified dismissals at the School of Music, and the merger of Architecture and Town Planning.

"Sharman was hired by my predecessor to do difficult things with a group of departments that were fairly disparate and needed to be brought together," says McCutcheon.

Pretty says three of the academic units she "inherited", which were brought together under the NICA umbrella, had budget problems and two had curriculum problems.

"These are all the things I had to work through – it doesn't make you that popular and I can tell you that I don't like it much."

But while McCutcheon and Pretty see economic necessity, others see another cost.

"They're ignoring the whole human wreckage cost at their peril, because at what cost the reputation of the University of Auckland?" says Tara Jahn-Werner, former director of arts management of the School of Creative and Performing Arts.

"That's far more costly than meeting your budget and getting your students and getting PBRFs [Performance-Based Research Fund] on target."

Jahn-Werner subscribes to the view that there is a climate of fear at NICA.

"Having survived being bullied, isolated, micromanaged and finally redundancy at [the] University of Auckland, I feel a great deal of sadness for the present staff."

Another willing to speak out is Elam professor Carole Shephard who did so in 2005 for a *Herald* article. "The ramifications of the article meant I did shut my mouth for a little while. I got called up to a 'come to Jesus' meeting with Sharman. From that point it was very clear to me there would be this marginalisation – subtly and not so subtly. From that point on I had almost no involvement in anything to do with Elam management or representation on committees."

Previously, and for 15 years, Shephard had been active in Elam and university-wide matters. Early this year she took early retirement. She has expressed some of her views about lack of consultation, and having her teaching and research devalued in a suite of digital prints called I said, he said, she said.

Another who feels unfairly treated is artist Fran Marno, who taught painting at Elam for six years. She left at the end of 2005 following a bitter redundancy round that saw 18 staff leave. In 2006 she found she was prevented from applying for the Kate Edger Educational Charitable Trust Post-Doctoral Research Award because the head of Elam, Derrick Cherrie, wouldn't support her application. Marno who had completed her doctorate at Elam, says staff were assured during redundancy negotiations their leaving would in no way jeopardise their future career. She pointed out to Cherrie and Pretty that she was only asking for minimal administrative support and a library card – as she had organised a supervisor, and had her own studio and computer. "When I said all that and [Cherrie] said no, I thought this isn't really about the fellowship, it's about me." Marno has since taken up the award supported by Unitec.

Pretty says it was a legitimate decision taken by the head of Elam and correct procedures were followed. "There is not a single piece of evidence of somebody being disadvantaged because they've spoken out about what the university does," says McCutcheon.

Another who feels the changes to Elam have been detrimental is former head of design, Bret de Their, who took early retirement at the end of 2005. He says he still receives correspondence from concerned students and was perturbed at the way faculty and the Elam management introduced the changes with little consultation and a lack of respect shown to many experienced and loyal staff.

In 2004 de Their produced a satirical version of the official NICA logo with the words "National Institute for the Curtailment of Artistic Initiative". He points to the diverse student designs for the Elam prospectus over the past 20 years (collector's pieces held at the Elam Library) compared to "the institutional, boring ones" now produced by NICA.

McCutcheon says a more structured approach to marketing was necessary. "There tended to be a view that the faculties were brands in their own right. The University of Auckland is the brand and what I wanted was a consistency of style and a consistency of brand."

Lecturer John Turner who teaches photography at Elam says his fears about academic standards have come true – standards have been lowered. The new interdisciplinary approach at Elam sees staff

teaching outside their area of expertise. "Rather than assign me only students who wanted to learn photography, at one stage a HR person suggested I could do a three-week workshop in painting – that I could learn painting in three weeks. Coming from a university, that is just appalling." McCutcheon and Pretty say they are aware of Turner's views but those views represent a minority.

Similar issues have been raised at the School of Music where there have been two instances of unjustified dismissal – the most notable being that of respected lecturer Dr Glenda Keam who fought and won reinstatement, successfully resisting the University's efforts to keep her reinstatement confidential. Many of the problems at the school appear to stem from the appointment by Pretty of Eric Hollis as head of school. Hollis took leave in December after a delegation of staff approached the deputy vice-chancellor concerned about his behaviour. He subsequently resigned. It was also revealed that a publication – *The Essential String Method* – cited on his CV on the university's website was not written by him and that other published work did not meet the usual academic rigour of being published in a reviewed journal.

Pretty acknowledged the false publication citing was "not a good thing" but claimed that had not been included in Hollis' application. Music staff beg to differ – pointing to a CV for Hollis (including the publication citations) that was sent to them prior to Hollis being interviewed. "[Hollis] was in my view a very committed and effective member of the team," says Pretty.

"He did a very good job. Unfortunately personal circumstances caused him to leave in January."

David Nalden, a fulltime staff member of 32 years at the School of Music who retired in early 2006, gives a different analysis.

"The upheavals experienced by NICA I and its members (upheavals to which I myself was no stranger) stemmed mainly from inadequate internal lines of communication and widely divergent views on the meaning of effective leadership."

At the end of an almost two-hour interview, it seems there are not just two different sides to this story, but two different planets. The *Herald* asks McCutcheon if he feels there are any problems with management at NICA I that should be addressed. "I don't think there is a problem with NICA I management. I think NICA I has some characteristics about it which is that it's a new faculty in which difficult things are being done trying to bring together quite disparate parts of the university."

The *Herald* also asks Pretty if criticism of her management style is valid. "I don't deny I keep a very close track of things. I think that is part of what people don't like. I think there has been very loose management that has led to these budgetary problems."

Does she keep too close a track? "No, I feel I need to establish good relationships and trust with people and then they have a lot of autonomy."

Do you have any information about the case? Email [Chris Barton](mailto:Chris.Barton@nzherald.co.nz)

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