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Pretty well rehearsed in reshaping the arts

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The College of Arts' new dean has the nous to navigate testing times head, writes Robin Usher.

PROFESSOR Sharman Pretty is disarmingly frank about the daunting task she faces overseeing the complete amalgamation of the Victorian College of the Arts with Melbourne University.

It will require not only a reshaping of the college's courses to fit in with the so-called Melbourne Model by 2011, but a scrutiny of the budget to save up to \$11 million a year.

Pretty moved into her new office from New Zealand this month as the founding dean of the university's new faculty of the VCA and music, a title she admits is also part of her change agenda. She is also in charge of the merger of the music schools from the two institutions into the country's biggest, with about 1000 full-time students.

While she agrees it is a big job, she says it does not mean she is re-inventing the wheel. "Most of the comparable institutions in Australia amalgamated with universities around 1990," she says, meaning the VCA is up to 19 years behind the rest of the country.

Under the VCA's longest-serving director, Andrea Hull, who stepped down last year after 14 years in the role, the college sought unsuccessfully to be funded directly by the federal Arts Ministry instead of through the Education Department.

The failed strategy eventually led to the university taking the college over in 2007.

"It was a noble ambition and it worked for a while," Pretty says. "But while I am not being critical, it means the other institutions have already come to terms with the new agenda in terms of money and research."

Pretty originally trained as an oboist but is renowned in music circles for her extensive reform as dean of Sydney University's conservatorium of music from 1995 to 2003 and its \$145 million building redevelopment.

She says the situation at the VCA is similar to what she faced in Sydney, with conservatorium staff opposed to a merger with Sydney University.

"Eight years later, it was completely amalgamated."

Her reputation as a change agent was confirmed with her latest role as the founding dean of Auckland University's national institute of creative arts and industries, which combined the arts, research and architecture.

She says there seems to be a positive energy at the VCA, combined with "understandable apprehension".

She acknowledges this will involve cost cutting, as well as increasing the number of fee-paying international students. The university will end its \$5 million annual subsidy of the college by 2011 and she says another \$6 million has to be found each year to pay rent to the university after the merger.

"That sounds like a lot but it's a very large campus on a large site," she says. "The university is responsible for services and maintenance that must cost somebody a lot of money but the accounting is not transparent."

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She must also oversee the restructuring of the VCA's six schools into three: dance, drama and production into a single school of performing arts; art, film and television into another; and the merger of the two music schools.

From 2011, all students will complete a three-year degree, either in fine arts or music, with another two years required for specialisation to fit the university's Melbourne Model, based on American and European practice.

Perry stresses that the VCA's practical instruction will continue. "That exists all round the world. Yale is internationally renowned but I'm sure it still teaches real actors and painters," she says.

"Few people go into a job after only three years of study, unlike 20 years ago. It's usually five years now."

She will be assisted in preparing the new curriculum by Professor Gary McPherson, who will take charge as the university's head of music in July with "significant experience" in curriculum development.

She agrees the separate locations of the Parkville and Southbank music campuses is a problem, but one she is used to from both Sydney and Auckland. "It's not ideal because it is harder to feel part of the whole," she says. "It is also hard to create trust."

As in Sydney, there is also the suggestion of a new building at the college for a combined music and opera school.

If the money was available, she says a new building could be completed in less than the six years it took in Sydney because of fewer construction problems, providing "a sense of optimism" for the faculty.

There is one other change she wants — a new name that better reflects what the faculty does. She says the current name is the result of a political compromise between the VCA and the university.

"It's a nonsensical name but there is no rush to find a better one," she says.

Pretty's grand plans for VCA

- Merge the music schools at the college and the University of Melbourne to create Australia's largest music faculty.
- Shave \$11 million a year from the budget.
- Create general three-year undergraduate fine arts or music degrees.
- Halve the number of schools at VCA from six to three.
- Build a new centre for the study of music and opera.
- Find a better name for the Faculty of VCA and Music.

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