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Staff, students at former VCA in crisis meetings

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There are fears the college, facing deep funding cuts, will lose its competitiveness, writes Robin Usher.

STAFF and students at the former Victorian College of the Arts have been holding crisis meetings to consider the loss of at least 12 casual support staff, impending budget cuts and the merger of schools, amid warnings the college's teaching integrity is at risk.

Now amalgamated with Melbourne University and known clumsily as the faculty of the VCA and music, the college is facing cuts of up to \$11 million a year, leading to fears that it will no longer be able to compete with other nationally recognised institutions such as Sydney's NIDA and the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts.

The National Tertiary Education Union's Matthew McGowan says trust in the administration under dean Sharman Pretty (pictured) is breaking down as anxieties grow about job security.

"Students enrol in the VCA, not Melbourne University, but that identity is under threat," he says. "Promises given to the VCA about its future identity after the merger are being trashed."

A 2005 heads of agreement over the merger also states there will be no changes to the college's funding without consultation and that its identity will be preserved.

But Professor Pretty responded by pointing out the VCA no longer existed. "When the Federal Government withdrew the \$5 million subsidy of the VCA, replacement money was supplied by Melbourne University until 2011," she says. "The university rescued the VCA and now the aim is to make it sustainable."

Her first priority is dealing with a \$1.5 million deficit this year, before tackling the looming \$11 million shortfall.

But students have organised their own campaign and set up a website, savevca.org, that invites protest letters to federal Education Minister Julia Gillard. A spokeswoman for the VCA Student Union, Alison Hope, says students are also taking up the issue themselves by posting videos on YouTube.

"There is a huge amount of distrust with the administration," she says, referring to the introduction of the university's "Melbourne model", made up of three years of undergraduate study followed by a two-year post-graduate degree. "The fear is that no actor or dancer will be able to pay the post-grad fees. It's not as if they earn the equivalent of doctors or engineers."

The union itself will cease to exist after June 30, when its funding ceases as a result of the merger, further impacting on the college's sense of identity.

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Ms Hope accuses the administration of using Orwellian language when it says the new music-theatre course and Australia's only puppetry course have been suspended from 2010.

"The university is avoiding language implying that it is slashing and burning courses. But as far as we are concerned, suspended means they will never come back. They are gutting the very nature of VCA courses."

The music-theatre course, which started this year, attracted 370 applicants; only 32 were accepted. But Professor Pretty says it will return if it can be made to fit into the model.

A VCA lecturer, who wants to be anonymous out of fears for her job security, says college graduates provide much of the talent to Victoria's performing arts and film and television industries.

"That will be put at risk if we lose the quality of teaching," she says, referring to speculation that cuts will reduce the use of outside experts such as film producer Nadia Tass. "Take that away and the VCA will no longer be able to deliver high-end results."

She says the film school is regarded as one of the top 10 in the world. "The esteem belongs to the VCA, not Melbourne University. I find it hard to believe that they would knowingly endanger such prestige."

But Professor Pretty says it is hard to make comparisons with other institutions because methods of funding are so varied, with NIDA and AFTRS being funded directly from the federal arts ministry. "Our benchmark partners are institutions such as the Sydney Conservatorium and WAAPA and there is no reason we can't compete with them to produce internationally competitive graduates," she says.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2009/05/20/1242498804864.html>