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Campus revolution aims at producing all-rounders

Corrie Perkin | June 05, 2009

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THE elegant three-storey 1920s building in Melbourne's St Kilda Road is an unlikely place for a revolution. But inside the dean's office at the Victorian College of the Arts and Music, Sharman Pretty is preparing to unveil courageous plans for her institution's future.

Recent speculation about the strategy has caused anguish within the tight-knit student and academic community which fears the original goals of the VCA are being diminished. But Pretty, a former dean of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, is confident that once her vision is revealed, it will have more supporters than detractors.

No one is certain yet how many teachers, courses and opportunities will remain, but one thing's for sure: the new strategy will change forever the culture of elite training that has dominated the college since it opened its doors 37 years ago.

VCAM - the VCA's new name since the University of Melbourne's music faculty came across in April - is at a critical junction. In 2007 financial pressures forced it to become a faculty of the University of Melbourne. Supporters suspected it was only a matter of time before the VCA's operating model and independence were threatened.

Like other university faculties, the college will adopt vice-chancellor Glyn Davis's Melbourne model, a course structure that offers students several broad undergraduate programs followed by a professional postgraduate degree. This is despite lobbying from previous VCA staff and board members for it to remain separate.

The college already has streamlined its number of schools to three: art, music and performing arts. In 2011 it will introduce the new model, although existing degree students will be allowed to finish their courses.

The college will continue to nurture talented young artists. But it will no longer allow them to focus solely on their special fields of endeavour such as art, ballet, violin, set design or acting.

Pretty is optimistic that VCAM students will benefit from the Melbourne model. She says students in other subjects can further their creative arts knowledge by taking a VCAM course.

"VCAM aspires to play a pivotal role in the university's future by establishing itself as a dynamic, responsive and sustainable faculty," she says. "Excellence and innovation in contemporary creative arts research, education, scholarship and practice will form the foundation of its work."

But it won't be an easy ride. Big changes are expected in the areas of administrative and academic staffing, financial structures, use of facilities and courses offered.

The days of one teacher for seven students are coming to an end. The college has a \$1.5million deficit it must address; regardless of the Melbourne model, Pretty says, cost-cutting is inevitable and the teaching model must be changed. Later this month Pretty will outline to staff and students the college's new objectives. She is prepared for a backlash from those who fear the college will no longer be able to produce highly skilled musicians, dancers, actors, artists, directors, filmmakers, technicians and administrators.

"I know the bumpy ride will take some time to work through, and then the world will open up," she says.

In recent weeks, opponents of the Melbourne model have set up a website and petition to "implore the federal and state governments to support our arts industry by adequately funding the VCA as an autonomous cultural institution, and to free it from its amalgamation with the University of Melbourne".

The issue has also received local media coverage that has generated letters and opinion articles. Several alumni have been asked to support the students' cause. Pretty is keen to communicate her message. But

until Davis formally approves the proposed changes (which he is expected to do in coming days), VCAM's dean must wait before she can talk freely with staff and students about the college's future.

Pretty is no stranger to reform controversy. From 1995 to 2004 she was dean of the Sydney Conservatorium during debate over its merger with the University of Sydney's music department.

In 2005 Pretty was appointed dean of Auckland University's National Institute of Creative Arts and Industries and she and her husband moved to New Zealand.

In an article published last December to mark her departure, the New Zealand Herald said she had been described as a "change agent ... autocratic, charming, extremely smart, efficient ... a chainsaw ... She showed a steel will and ability to ride through anything".

Pretty says although the institutions and issues are different, the Sydney Conservatorium and Auckland experiences taught her that well-funded and respected institutions can become complacent when it comes to budget control. The VCA, she says, was nodifferent.

"It's when you hit the wall financially that people are forced to sit up and take notice and say, 'Well, this can't go on,'" she says. "This then causes one to go back and review what you're doing, and all sorts of things start to emerge."

In her two months in Melbourne, she says, she has discovered "a huge amount of wastage because things have been able to gather their own momentum and not be focused and strategic".

Physically, the VCA has been allowed to sprawl across its large St Kilda Road site - a former police depot - with no obvious planning strategy.

The number of academic staff has also grown in a haphazard way. "And so it goes on, because there hasn't been the financial discipline to stop and ask: is it necessary?" she says.

Pretty says the college was also prone to to the fashion, dominant in higher education in the late 1980s and early '90s, for "boutique degrees, like master of production: puppetry, and master of production: stage design".

"People now tend to package them up ... and try and find a vessel through which people can collaborate," Pretty says.

Collaboration and "inter-practice" learning is at the core of Pretty's vision for the new VCAM. "I am astonished at how siloed this campus has been," she says. "It's siloed in its programs, it's siloed in its narrow little degree programs, and it's physically siloed to the point where there are people who have worked on this site for many years together who have only recently got to know each other."

Producing elite dancers that only become ballet dancers, or actors that only act, is no longer appropriate in Australia, she says.

"The only way people are learning to sustain a real career in the theatre, for example, is if they can write the play, act, make their own costume and sell the tickets.

"If they've got a whole package of skills there's a very good chance they will be able to find a niche and sustain themselves. The idea of someone being a specialist is a very old view."

Pretty confirms VCAM will stay at its St Kilda Road site, currently home to around 800 students. The university's music students - about 700 - are still at the main Parkville campus but will move to VCAM when a proposed new music building opens in the next few years.

Is she confident her creative arts students won't suffer when they become part of the Melbourne model?

"I'm absolutely sure they won't," she says emphatically. "But it does mean the institution has to ask itself: what are the benefits of making these links to other kinds of learning? What are the benefits of understanding something about psychology or languages? How will it help our students?"

"All these different things will open up to our students, but it's about ownership. They will have to learn how to work the system.

"The whole university is open to them, they can either shut the whole lot out and say, 'I don't want any of that, I just want to focus on my own little area', or they can embrace the whole lot and say excitedly 'How many of these things can I do?'"

"The whole world is open to them. And that's very exciting."

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