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POLITICS, THE UNIVERSE, ETC

10 . The University of Melbourne gags VCA staff

Andrew Crook writes:

The University of Melbourne has placed an unprecedented gag on Victorian College of the Arts staff members talking to the media, in contravention of the University's own academic freedom rules.

In an email obtained by *Crikey*, VCAM Dean Sharman Pretty told senior staff member Martin Croft, the resident director of hit musical *Jersey Boys* and the now-cancelled Music Theatre

program, that talking to journalists over the changes at VCAM would be "unwise".

Senior staff members are currently locked in a battle with the University over reforms to the course stemming from the introduction of the controversial Melbourne Model.

"As a member of the staff of the University of Melbourne, it is expected that you will comply with the University's request of all staff, that interface with media is managed by the communications experts who draw on the sources that they believe appropriate to address any particular issue at a given time", the email says.

"The University has the right to form its position on various issues and to communicate its messages in a coherent and consistent manner by staff of its choice."

Pretty tells Croft that staff members are free to speak as individuals, but doubted their ability to handle requests from journalists:

"It is quite a difficult thing to manage when pressed by journalist and other interested parties. I suspect Mark's [Pollard, Head of Composition at VCAM] advice to you was therefore a short-hand version of suggesting that to interface with the press would be unwise."

However, the University's [guidelines on academic freedom](#) in its collective agreement appear to fly in the face of Pretty's missive:

Intellectual freedom means the freedom of academic staff ... to engage in critical inquiry, intellectual discourse and public controversy without fear or favour.

Croft, defying his superior, told *Crikey* that VCAM staff were running scared:

"Professor Pretty has a history of aggressive tactics, and it has got to the situation where staff feel like they can't express themselves over the issue."

And in a further indication of the command and control culture overrunning the University, another leaked email reveals Pretty is being fed her lines direct from Vice Chancellor Glyn Davis' office.

Substantial slabs of a reply by Davis to an email contesting the changes at VCAM have been faithfully reproduced by Pretty in her [August update](#), posted on the VCAM website.

On the issue of the Melbourne Model, Davis and Pretty both say precisely the same thing (read the identical Davis email [here](#)):

Under the Melbourne Model, VCAM students will have an opportunity to choose from a suite of 'breadth subjects' which can be aligned closely to the students' chosen career destination and enhance their career opportunities. We have a responsibility to prepare our graduates for a full and lifelong career in the arts, and in that context, students need to understand their specialist discipline in the context of the broader contemporary agendas of society. A narrow world view is not the hallmark of a great artist. There will be an opportunity for commencing students to specialise from their first year, and the focus of specialisation will become increasingly intense so that, at the graduate level, students will be better prepared to be singularly focused on their art form from the perspective of a broader foundation of learning than they currently have had the opportunity to establish.

Crikey made multiple attempts to contact Pretty at the VCAM, but the phone rang out. A University spokesperson defended the right of academics "to talk about their area of expertise", but refused to comment on the Glyn Davis double-up.

The VCA recently merged with the University's Faculty of Music and is in the midst of adopting the Davis-backed Melbourne Model, which critics claim will strip the institution of key funding. The music theatre and puppetry courses have already been axed.

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11 . Never mind the RET, let's just thrash the opposition