



Printed August 17, 2009 01:44am AEST

Artists protest over academic 'breadth'

Andrew Trounson | August 17, 2009

Article from: [The Australian](#)

STUDENT dancers, musicians and artists this week will stage protest performances in Melbourne over fears that practical training at the old Victorian College of the Arts will be diluted by Melbourne University's plan to introduce more academic breadth.

About a hundred students yesterday set up tents outside the VCA during the university's open day while actress Noni Hazlehurst addressed students and called on the federal and state governments to intervene.

Melbourne University took over the cash-strapped VCA in 2007 and it is now a faculty of the university. From 2011 it plans to introduce a new curriculum based on its Melbourne Model that provides generalist three-year undergraduate degrees, followed by more specialist courses at the postgraduate level.

VCA alumni and actors such as Geoffrey Rush, along with staff and students, have launched a campaign to head off changes that would dilute the practical focus. They are particularly concerned the Melbourne Model does not cater for artists such as dancers who have necessarily short careers. They are also concerned that cost-cutting will reduce practical training.

"I can't see any evidence that what is being done will be advantageous on any level except possibly on the economic bottom line," Hazlehurst said yesterday.

But faculty dean Sharman Pretty accused the protesters of trying to shut down debate. While the new curriculum would look at adding breadth, she said a practical focus would be maintained. "The two aren't mutually exclusive," she said.

She said the review had only just started and that staff, students and industry would be consulted. And she believes the university will be prepared to modify the Melbourne Model to accommodate the practical needs of different disciplines where the arguments stack up.

"We need to move away from the pure master/apprentice model and move into a more contextually higher education model," Professor Pretty said. She said the university wanted to ensure students had broader skills to make them competitive.

But for theatrical and film agent John Powell that approach is "ludicrous".

"What we want is good dancers, actors and singers who can be employed immediately when they leave college and not somebody who can write a good essay," he said.

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