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VCA uprising engulfs Glyn Davis

University of Melbourne Vice-Chancellor Glyn Davis has a problem on his hands as unrest grows at the Victorian College of Arts.

Today, VCA students staged a well-attended (and suitably theatrical) protest rally and march from St Kilda Road to Melbourne Parliament in Bourke Street, accompanied by high-profile supporters Julia Zemiro and Geoffrey Rush.

The rally featured more than the usual pomp and ceremony of student protest, with Rush giving a rousing speech decrying attempts to erode the practical nature of the VCA's training and calling for Arts Minister Peter Garrett to take over funding for the VCA as a national arts training institution in the same category as NIDA and AFTRS.

The University seems to have badly under-estimated the strength of feeling about the proposed changes to VCA. The protests are now starting to garner broader media attention, owing to strong feelings in Melbourne's tight-knit artistic community and the high profile of Rush and Zemiro. Now three prominent members of the VCA Advisory Board have quit in what looks [suspiciously like a protest](http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/arts-music-board-members-quit-20090819-egmw.html) (<http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/arts-music-board-members-quit-20090819-egmw.html>).

The situation has been exacerbated by the University's ham-fisted attempts to spin the issue. The Embattled new Dean, Sharman Pretty, who has become the lightning rod for student and staff discontent, was initially held back from all but hand-picked media appearances, until this strategy started to look like arrogance. When she finally fronted up to be interviewed by the ABC 774's Jon Faine this Wednesday, it was deer-in-the-headlights stuff as Faine took her apart on air. No wonder University of Melbourne spokeswoman Christina Buckridge is sounding increasingly frustrated at *Crikey's* repeated attempts to try and get some on-the-record comment from either herself or Pretty.

The strength and feeling of student, staff and community protest about the VCA course changes appear to have surprised senior executives at the University, who perhaps thought the VCA could be successfully integrated without too much fuss. Instead, student action has intensified with a week of

protests culminating in today's rally and march. Vice-Chancellor Glynn Davis can now be expected to start to feel some pressure over the furore.

The protests were initially in response to the University's decision to [axe two courses](http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/05/21/vcas-puppetry-course-on-the-chopping-block/) (<http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/05/21/vcas-puppetry-course-on-the-chopping-block/>), puppetry and music theatre from the VCA's 2010 intake. It then emerged that other course changes, including the introduction of the so-called "Melbourne Model" would be implemented.

The background to the story, as [reported last week](http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/08/10/new-dean-cops-the-wrath-of-vca-students/) (<http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/08/10/new-dean-cops-the-wrath-of-vca-students/>), is that the University's appointment of Dean Sharman Pretty appears to have been about hiring an experienced university manager to drive through cost-cutting measures; Pretty was in charge of similar controversial amalgamations in Sydney and Auckland.

Soon after Dean Pretty arrived, she suspended two key courses, puppetry and music theatre, amalgamated the VCA with the Music course, and formulated a business plan (which leaked) to shed jobs and increase staff-student ratios from 7 to 12.

Crikey has continued to chase Sharman Pretty for an interview, so far without success.



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