

The National

Stars rally to defend Australian arts school

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SYDNEY // Acrobats, a giant pantomime squirrel and a Hollywood movie star have joined protesters in Melbourne demanding the integrity of one of Australia's most renowned schools of performing art be protected.

Campaigners are worried that highly specialised and practical courses at the Victorian College of Arts (VCA) will be ruined by plans to impose a more rigorous academic curriculum.

Financial troubles prompted the famous institution, which has produced many of Australia's most accomplished artists, to become a faculty of Melbourne University in 2007. The college's tuition is to be reviewed by university officials who want the programme to remain relevant and competitive, but there are deep concerns that the changes might force students to take more generalised, theoretical subjects rather than focus exclusively on their chosen field.

On a cold and wet winter's day, hundreds of students demonstrated outside the Victoria state parliament demanding that the probity of their beloved school be maintained.

"We had a marching brass band from the music department, we had a lot of puppets and a good majority of everyone who appeared were dressed up in costumes made by the students. It was a combination of protest and celebration of our arts," said the rally organiser, David Haidon.

"A lot of people care about the VCA. They know what it is and who comes out of it and it would be an absolute shame for the proclaimed arts capital of Australia to lose such an important part of the arts community," added Mr Haidon, who insisted that the college's artistic spirit would "be crushed completely" by changes to its inimitable teaching methods.

Geoffrey Rush, an Oscar-winning actor, has lent his support to the students' campaign. The star of the Pirates of the Caribbean adventures told a boisterous crowd that such centres of excellence as the Victorian College, where he once taught, gave its graduates an unrivalled start to their careers.



"I know after 38 years that artistic training requires guts, resilience, a personal development in technical assurance, an imagination that needs awakening without cliché to keep guiding the student in the workforce arena with ever-shifting inspiration," Mr Rush told the crowd.

Much of what the college does revolves around practical instruction. About 80 per cent of classes are based on a functional approach to a variety of disciplines, including sculpture, dance, drama and theatrical production as well as film, television and puppetry.

The school has produced an array of celebrated choreographers, opera singers and animators, among them Adam Elliot, who won an Academy Award for his short film Harvie Krumpet in 2004.

Melbourne University has strongly denied that the rich fabric of the arts college is at risk. A senior official said the debate over proposed alterations to the curriculum had been subject to "an amazing case of misinformation".

In a letter to staff, Glyn Davis, the university's vice chancellor, has tried to assuage fears that the college's unique practices would be snuffed out by more academic requirements.

"In recent weeks, there have been claims this long-standing commitment to excellence in visual and performing arts training is under threat," Mr Davis wrote. "On the contrary, the future of the faculty is assured, with an undiminished commitment by the university to support its fine work.

“The arts is an area for creativity and innovation. The university will continue to provide substantive additional subsidies to ensure it has the people and facilities to offer the quality of education necessary to support a vibrant body of arts professionals,” he added.

The vice chancellor's assurances have not, however, diluted the concerns of Sue Pennicuik, a Greens member of the Victoria parliament, who believes the college's hands-on style does not sit well with administrators.

“The university doesn't value that type of training and there is really a clash of cultures there,” she said.

“We all love our artists, actors, musicians and dancers that come from the college, but if we love and appreciate them, then we need to support them through their intensive training because that's how they get to be the people we see on our television screens and on our stages,” Ms Pennicuik said.

The state and federal governments are being urged to find the money to guarantee the artistic independence of one of the country's cultural jewels.

The university has promised to broadly canvass opinion before any changes are made, although students have insisted that they have not yet been asked what they think.

“One of the things that we are really angry about is the lack of communication from the higher echelons of the university administration,” Mr Haidon said. “Teachers and students haven't been consulted about courses and the industries that we are all going to move into when we finish our degrees haven't been consulted.”

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