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Woes hit sour note at music school

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IN the face of an 800-strong protest rally University of Melbourne vice-chancellor Glyn Davis has assured students, staff and the arts industry that the Victorian College of the Arts and Music faculty's curriculum will continue to be "thoroughly grounded in practical training".

In an email to staff sent on the day of last week's rally Professor Davis said the university would consult widely on a new curriculum for 2011. But protesters say they will keep the pressure on, fearing that the formerly independent VCAM's focus on practical training could yet be diluted by the university's Melbourne model that requires students to take breadth subjects. "We are going to keep the pressure on because it is really important that people get proper training in their discipline," VCAM lecturer and a protest spokeswoman Ros Walker told the HES.

Faculty dean Sharman Pretty has said the faculty needs to shift its curriculum towards "contextualising training in the world of higher education". But she has so far struggled to get across her message that a potentially broader academic curriculum would "empower" students' long-term learning and make them more competitive.

At the root of the unrest at the VCAM, however, is money. The protesters fear that curriculum change is just a stalking horse for cost-cutting. Melbourne's flow of investment income has dried up in the wake of the global financial crisis. Melbourne calculates that it is subsidising the VCAM to the tune of about \$17 million a year, but that VCAM is still facing a \$1m-plus operating deficit this year. Professor Pretty's business plan aims to cut costs and make revenue gains to reduce the subsidy to \$6m a year by 2013.

While protesters claim the extent of the subsidy is exaggerated, the university and Professor Pretty have inherited a problem caused by the federal government in 2006 cutting the old VCA's funding by 35 per cent and effectively forcing it to seek a merger with the university.

Professor Pretty is looking to adopt a less intensive teaching model that would increase student to staff ratios at the faculty from what she says is an unnecessarily high 7.4:1 to about an average 12:1. "There is considerable room to move before anyone could argue that at a higher student-to-staff ratio it isn't possible to train world-class artists," she said.

But Ms Walker is concerned that given Melbourne's commitment to breadth, staff cuts, and plans for a more uniform but reduced teaching calendar, practical teaching will be squeezed. Professor Davis met VCAM staff yesterday and agreed to consider their concerns.

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