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New Dean cops the wrath of VCA students

by [Ben Eltham \(http://www.crikey.com.au/author/beneltham/\)](http://www.crikey.com.au/author/beneltham/)

Has the University of Melbourne blundered by appointing Sharman Pretty to run the new and “improved” Faculty of the Victorian Centre for the Arts and Music?

Discontent at VCA’s Southbank campus is beginning to crystallise around the new Dean, apparently brought in from Auckland University specifically for the task of ramming through controversial “Melbourne model” curriculum changes to the newly acquired Victorian College of the Arts (now ponderously named the “Faculty of the VCA and Music”). After a student meeting which attracted more than 400 concerned students and staff last week, *Crikey* understands some form of student action against the changes is now likely.

As I reported [back in May \(http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/05/21/vcas-puppetry-course-on-the-chopping-block/\)](http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/05/21/vcas-puppetry-course-on-the-chopping-block/), the VCA crisis has taken five years to develop. Previously a highly specialised vocational training institution that prided itself on industry contacts and hands-on, prac-heavy course structures, the VCA was forced to merge with the University of Melbourne in 2007, after running up a deficit when the Federal Government under Brendan Nelson reduced its funding levels in 2003 legislation.

Education analysts like Gavin Moody have pointed out that the VCA’s previous federal funding was anomalously high. On the other hand, teaching things like film-making and musical theatre in a genuinely practical way doesn’t come cheap, which is why arts training institutions like NIDA, AFTRS and the Australian National Academy of Music are all funded at higher-than-university levels by Peter Garrett’s federal Arts department.

The merger with the University of Melbourne meant the VCA’s old funding model and course structures were no longer tenable, and it appears as though the university hired Sharman Pretty (whose reputation at Auckland University was either horrendous or commendable, depending on whether you were an architecture student or a university administrator) as a gun for hire, experienced at driving through faculty restructures.

But Pretty’s management style so far has been simultaneously aloof and confrontational. Students say they can’t get access to her. Meanwhile, as *Crikey*’s Andrew Crook [reported on Friday \(http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/08/07/the-university-of-melbourne-gags-vca-staff/#comments\)](http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/08/07/the-university-of-melbourne-gags-vca-staff/#comments), staff that are speaking out, such as those in the soon-to-be-axed music theatre course, are being gagged and threatened by Pretty.

Pretty’s early strategy was to deny impending rumours of job cuts and wholesale course changes, while working assiduously behind the scenes to implement the restructure. According to students I have spoken to, the only communication students have had so far from Dean Pretty on the restructure is a short message posted to the [VCAM’s website \(http://www.vcam.unimelb.edu.au/message_dean_update_August.html\)](http://www.vcam.unimelb.edu.au/message_dean_update_August.html) in which she takes “the opportunity therefore to explain to you a little about what integration of our degree programs into the Melbourne Model will mean,” before going on to suggest VCA’s existing prac-based courses would not meet “Federal and State regulations and legislation, which govern which activities can — and cannot — be properly considered the concern of a ‘university.’”

If Pretty is right, then there must be some worried business and medical school deans out there, considering how vocationally-oriented and practically focused most MBA and graduate medicine courses claim to be. I've heard many justifications for implementing the Melbourne Model, but to date I know of no-one in either the state or federal education bureaucracies who have suggested that prac-based course structures contravene federal or state higher education laws.

Pretty's strange message then goes on to lecture dance students about how they should consider an alternative career as a "choreographer, director, teacher or researcher", which are apparently activities "not so constrained by the student's physical capacities." It's scarcely a ringing endorsement of the Faculty's Dance program, or indeed the choice of those dance students who actually just want to be, err, dancers.

In a final rhetorical flourish, Pretty goes on to quote neo-conservative political philosopher Michael Oakeshott (but, tut tut, without a reference, which would surely get her marked down in a first-year essay), who proclaimed in a 1950 essay [The Idea of a University](http://wiki.cse.cuhk.edu.hk/irwin.king/_media/teaching/gen1113/scn_20090202113046_001.pdf?id=teaching%3Agen1113%3A2008&cache=cache) that "one may go to some sorts of art schools and be taught ten ways of drawing a cat or a dozen tricks to remember in painting an eye, but the scholar as teacher will teach, not [just] how to draw or paint, but how to see."

It's an interesting little addition, that "[just]" in square brackets, because a close reading of Oakeshott's essay reveals he is really arguing for a highly scholastic approach to teaching, heavily grounded in theory — in other words, exactly what Pretty claims will not be happening.

In fact, as Miki Perkins at [The Age](http://www.theage.com.au/national/job-cuts-add-to-woes-at-vca-20090807-ecyf.html) reported over the weekend, a leaked business plan obtained by the students shows that next year's music course will be far less practical than the one replacing it, with many fewer performance subjects and more academic subjects in their place.

Perhaps Sharman Pretty is not worried. "A narrow world view is not the hallmark of a great artist," she writes in her website message. This is in fact demonstrably untrue, as anyone who has actually studied the lives of great artists can tell you.

But Pretty's message from on high also ignores the central point that students and industry professionals are making, which is that they want to go to VCA to learn technical proficiency — craft and practice — in their chosen artform. After all, there are plenty of art history, literature, musicology, theatre and film studies courses out there, including at the [University of Melbourne itself](http://www.culture-communication.unimelb.edu.au/).

