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Protesters have jumped the gun on plans for the VCA

Sharman Pretty
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A final decision on how this arts model will work is still to be discussed.

MELBOURNE is often described as the arts capital of Australia, and its centrepiece is the Southbank Arts Precinct, unrivalled in Australia in its concentration of first-rate arts venues and leading arts organisations. Why not transform Southbank into one of the leading arts destinations of the world, to rival the Barbican in London or the Lincoln Centre in New York?

For the University of Melbourne, which has been entrusted with leading the arts education complex at Southbank, this means imagining an arts education campus which is the match of the leading arts schools of the world.

What are these schools like? They are filled with talented arts students from around the world; they are formally partnering with major arts companies, and have practical internships in their courses and outstanding records of placing their graduates in arts employment.

They are also schools with international networks of exchange agreements, through which students take part of their course elsewhere, experiencing the leading institutions of Europe or North America. They offer sophisticated programs of integrated studies beyond the student's individual practice, programs that ensure students are prepared for the rapidly changing array of arts careers.

We have the opportunity to create such an environment in Melbourne, by building on the unique array of resources now brought together in the University of Melbourne's Faculty of the VCA and Music.

But first let me be clear that the "highly controversial merger" with the University of Melbourne, and the "proposed changes", in which six schools "will be restructured into three" had already happened well before my arrival as dean just four months ago.

In fact, the VCA became an affiliate of the University of Melbourne almost 20 years ago, and then became a faculty of the university in 2007 after then federal education minister Brendan Nelson cut the VCA's funding by 35 per cent from 2005 levels.

Its expansion into the Faculty of VCA and Music, by joining with the former Faculty of Music, was agreed in 2008, with the unanimous support of the VCA integration committee.

The arrangement of the faculty in three schools - still retaining the six disciplines - was determined last year. None of these things are new.

A key factor in the creation of the new Faculty of the VCA and Music was ensuring that neither of the two former faculties, each with its own long traditions, would subsume the other; together something new and promising would be

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created.

Indeed, one of the benefits of the union was the creation of a new School of Music, which holds the prospect of becoming one of the largest and finest in South-East Asia.

Bringing together two music schools, each with their own curriculums, obviously means discussion of how to co-ordinate them, and offer one coherent new-generation degree course for the future. Those discussions will take time; they have scarcely begun, given that the newly appointed head of school, Professor Gary McPherson, has only been in place less than a month.

Curriculum discussions in the other art forms will not likely begin until VCAM has first settled Music.

And in any of the coming curriculum discussions, the future of the curriculum is unlikely to see specialist arts practice compromised.

The university has for many years supported a practitioner-based education, thoroughly grounded in the six core VCAM disciplines of music, arts, drama, dance, production and film and TV.

In recent days, education in these art forms has been described as if it must be forever fixed.

But best education practice in all these disciplines continues to evolve, and student demand shifts over time in response to social and technological developments.

As in other fields, the university encourages careful regular consideration of curriculum, to ensure teaching at the faculty reflects the best nationally and internationally.

The "Melbourne Model" approach has been portrayed as if it is a straitjacket in which artists will be paralysed. In fact there are as many "Melbourne Models" as there are new-generation degrees at Melbourne, each tailored to the needs of particular fields of study.

Each new-generation degree program was developed through a year-long process of discussion, consultation and debate, before consideration by the Academic Board. The process will be no different at VCAM.

The arts is an area for creativity and innovation. The courses offered by VCAM already support deep engagement in a discipline, alongside shared courses so students can supplement their practice with access to disciplines that can enrich artistic expression.

This blend of immersion and breadth has characterised VCAM degrees for many years, and will continue.

In the months ahead, VCAM hopes to pursue a dialogue about its mission of educational excellence.

Many discussions with staff, students, alumni and members of the arts community are required before any proposed new curriculum can be advanced for consideration by the university community and beyond.

This conversation is yet to begin; we are far from a final decision.

Professor Sharman Pretty has been dean of the Faculty of VCA and Music at the University of Melbourne since April.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/protesters-have-jumped-the-gun-on-plans-for-the-vca-20090826-ezpk.html>