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A thriving arts sector is born from colleges like the VCA

Tania De Jong
August 28, 2009 - 12:00AM

Planned changes will jeopardise Melbourne's status as a creative leader.

WHEN I was an aspiring performing artist, getting into the Victorian College of the Arts was like climbing Mount Everest. But if you were accepted, you had a chance of becoming a top-class artist. It was only at the VCA that you received consistent intensive studio-based training. It was the place where, as a raw recruit, you gradually polished the rough diamond of your artistic potential.

We thought of it as Australia's version of New York's acclaimed Juilliard School, and to have six disciplines - art, dance, drama, music, film and television - all on the one campus made us strive even harder. If such a peak arts training institution had not existed, my colleagues and I would most certainly have left Melbourne to study abroad.

Could it be possible that the proponents of the current restructure don't realise the implications of attempting to convert a unique, highly specialised performing and visual arts institution into a "Melbourne Model"?

The VCA was amalgamated with Melbourne University in 2007, and since then the heads of agreement that underpinned this merger have been eroded - mainly for financial reasons.

Under the proposed changes, the VCA's six specialist training schools would be restructured into three, and from 2011 students would undertake a three-year undergraduate level and then specialise in one artistic discipline at postgraduate level.

But there is growing concern that the closing of courses such as music theatre and puppetry, and cutting back specialist staff and training, will reduce a world-class program to a narrower, academically conventional undergraduate degree.

We need a solution. But let's start with some implicit truths: the VCA positions Melbourne and Australia as a centre of creativity, innovation and excellence in the performing and visual arts; international schools of this nature develop the reputation of their cities and countries well beyond the cost of the annual investment; and the drawing power of an iconic institution is critical to attracting talent from here and overseas. Add to this the fact that becoming a world-class artist requires constant training and practise - not study.

We should transform the debate from merely being about a college, a university or a state institution and acknowledge what is required for artists to survive and thrive in the 21st century. That is, while artists require a general context in which arts practice takes place, intensive studio training is what creates world-class artists. This will not be possible with the university's proposed cuts.

There is provision for a demerger under the terms of the agreement between Melbourne University and the VCA. It should now be exercised and discussions held to find a solution and possible alternatives.

There is an opportunity to create a National Academy for Creative Arts funded by the Federal Government. It should expand on the VCA's distinctive approach and be located in the thriving arts precinct of Melbourne supported by our vibrant arts community. This academy would operate in a similar way to the successful National Institute of Dramatic Art model with the University of NSW, or as a stand-alone institution such as the Australian Institute of Sport.

The second alternative for a successful national entity is that of the Centre for Social Impact based at the University of NSW. This centre is housed at one university but has several other member institutions around Australia, giving it a truly national presence.

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Another option is a demerger between the VCA and Melbourne University offering the opportunity to include the VCA in another university that can give the priority and independence required for this type of peak academy. Monash University is a good example, as it has successfully integrated other centres of excellence within its structure without compromising their autonomy and purpose.

As Geoffrey Rush says, what have we come to when we allow the education of our most talented artists to be compromised by economic priorities?

The uncertain future of the VCA has the potential to really dent our reputation as an internationally creative city. If we cannot maintain our edge in the arts, which we have built largely through the training excellence of the VCA, this will in turn affect our creative capabilities in other areas and the "talent" will go elsewhere.

Strategic foresight is required to ensure we do not lose something we will find impossible to replace. In 10 years there will be wistfulness about what was, and a desire to create something that is like the VCA or NACA. But, by then it will be too late.

Let us simply ask the question: Do we want to be known as one of the world's leading creative cities or not? If we answer yes, then we need to create peak academies that stand tall and proud.

Tania de Jong, AM, is a graduate of the VCA in opera and a bachelor of law with honours from the University of Melbourne. She is the founder of Music Theatre Australia, Pot-Pourri, Creativity Australia and The Song Room.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/a-thriving-arts-sector-is-born-from-colleges-like-the-vca-20090827-f143.html>