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Arts head says give merger a chance

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AS A director of four Melbourne international arts festivals Kristy Edmunds became a much admired, almost revered, figure among many of the city's creative community for her "cutting-edge and cross-disciplinary" approach to the arts.

The American-born artist's reputation for change was warmly endorsed last year when she became the Victorian College of the Arts' inaugural head of performing arts, and was charged with bringing its dance, drama, production and puppetry schools under one umbrella.

But since then the reception to innovation has become frostier as students, famous artists, former alumni and politicians have waged protests to proposed changes to the VCA. From 2011 the college's curriculum will morph into the more academic "Melbourne model" of its parent body, the University of Melbourne.

Edmunds, 43, has remained silent during the recent weeks of protests in which Oscar-winning actor Geoffrey Rush addressed a rally in the city and 11 former Victorian arts ministers failed in a bid to get the university's vice-chancellor, Glyn Davis, to agree to an independent "evidence-based" review of the merger of the two institutions. The former ministers also sought a guarantee that practical training hours would not be reduced until the review was concluded.

"I wonder where all of this activism was when all of these decisions were made years ago" Ms Edmunds said, in reference to the merger, which was formalised in 2007 as a consequence of Federal Government funding cuts.

Ms Edmunds said she welcomed debate about arts funding but said she was faced with "the here and now" of putting a program in place.

"When I joined the VCA the university merger was done, the name change was done and the merger with the faculty of music was decided," she said. Ms Edmunds said a "strange hysteria" had developed about aspects of the merger.

"You can't learn (to) dance from a textbook and the same goes for acting and directing. We have galleries and studios and theatres here. We are not going to be teaching by giving lectures with PowerPoint," she said.

"There hasn't been any evidence of anyone imposing a curriculum that creates mediocrity," she said, adding that staff were committed to training.

She was not approaching the merger with suspicion but could understand how others might because details of the new curriculum probably would not be known until the end of the year.

Ms Edmunds and the VCA teaching staff are working their way through details, which she said included how best to accommodate puppetry and music theatre training (to be suspended in 2010).

"Proposed changes are just proposed, they are not imposed, so this debate is a robust prompt for people to say this is what we need in this curriculum. You can't look at proposed curriculum change as a threat. Even if everything at the VCA was the pinnacle of perfection, there is always room for improvement," she said.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/arts-head-says-give-merger-a-chance-20090902-f8ff.html>