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# The art of the matter

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## Issues in the News: The Victorian College of the Arts

Reshaping the former Victorian College of the Arts to fit snugly with the University of Melbourne's new educational model is proving controversial.

### What is VCAM?

Actors, musicians, artists, dancers and filmmakers — creative performers and practitioners — have been trained at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA), at Southbank, for more than three decades. Though known as one of the great creative arts colleges in Australia, its future was jeopardised in 2004 when the Federal Government cut its funding by \$5 million annually. The University of Melbourne, a long-time affiliate of the college, stepped in and picked up the cash shortfall by levying its other faculties and drawing upon its investments.

In 2007, the VCA formally amalgamated with the university and is now known as the faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts and Music (VCAM).

### What is ahead for VCAM?

While significant funds have been committed to supplement VCAM to 2011, it is alleged that its current operating costs and staffing levels are unsustainable. After 2011, the university will end its \$5 million yearly subsidy, and will require a further \$6 million annually from the faculty in rent.

VCAM dean Professor Sharman Pretty, who handled the amalgamation of Sydney's Conservatorium with Sydney University some years ago, has two major tasks ahead: to reshape VCAM courses to fit the new “Melbourne Model” by 2011, and to encourage its self-sufficiency by shearing \$11 million from its yearly budget.

### What is the Melbourne Model?

At the time of the amalgamation, the University of Melbourne was undergoing fundamental changes of its own. It introduced what is known as the “Melbourne Model”. Embracing the notion of educational “breadth” in study, this philosophy places value on undergraduate students studying subjects that have no obvious connection to their main disciplines.

In theory, fostering this depth of knowledge will broaden students' minds and diversify their career prospects. In practical terms, 25 per cent of all undergraduate courses will be made up of “breadth” subjects; with degrees leading either to a career; to further specialised studies in a graduate professional degree, or to a higher research degree.

### Will VCAM fit the Melbourne Model?

VCAM's compatibility with the university model is the subject of heated debate. The plan, however, is to restructure VCAM's six schools into three: dance, drama and production will become a single performing arts school; art, film and television will join forces, and the two music schools will become one. Students will be required to complete a three-year degree in either fine arts or music, followed by two years of postgraduate study, specialising in their chosen fields.

Professor Pretty says: “It's about giving students the opportunity to have their eyes opened ... a singer might go and take languages or a musician might take psychology.”

She reiterates that VCAM's curriculum is still under review and yet to be developed, but that staff, students and industry members will be widely consulted when it is.

### **What is the response?**

Many industry professionals, staff and students are very unhappy about the proposed changes, which some have labelled “ludicrous”. They say terms such as “curriculum changes” and “sustainability” are merely euphemisms for “asset stripping” and “cost cutting”.

Students recently staged protests over the funding cuts they say will severely hamper the school's competitiveness, dilute its practical focus, and put the quality of teaching at risk. One student recently accepted his degree declaring, “people could thank the University of Melbourne for ripping the heart out of the VCA”.

Other critics argue that the Melbourne Model gives vocational arts practice a long, drawn-out academic focus that is unsuitable for many artistic students; particularly dancers, who generally have comparatively short careers. They say the VCAM curriculum already includes broader studies and is not as singular as some claim.

Others welcome the proposed changes. Professor Pretty attempts to reassure, saying the new curriculum will maintain its practical focus, but add educational breadth.

### **Recent Headlines**

“Woes hit sour note at music school” *The Australian*, August 26

“The Melbourne model is looking rather anorexic” *The Age*, July 22

“Campus revolution aims at producing all-rounders” *The Australian*, June 5

“Culture clash” *The Age*, August 27

### **What *The Age* says**

“The inherent danger if the restructuring proposals for the VCA go ahead, is that it will become something it was never meant to be. The Melbourne Model, which this newspaper has broadly supported as a fundamental part of the evolution of the university itself, fits as easily at the VCA as a round actor descending through a square trapdoor. To proceed with such drastic change, in the face of considerable opposition that is not without good reason, would rob Victoria of one of its most valued cultural assets, as well as put it in a different league from other similar vocational institutions ... over 35 years, the VCA has supplied the arts with a stream of the best and brightest actors, directors, artists and musicians. It is a specialist institution with special needs. It should not be jeopardised by being forced to conform to a model that does not suit it.”

Editorial opinion, August 27

### **What people say**

“I can't see any evidence that what is being done will be advantageous on any level except possibly on the economic bottom line.”

Actress, Noni Hazlehurst, *The Australian*, August 17

“The furore about reforms at the VCA misses an important point. A committee of artists and arts educators carried out a comprehensive review of the VCA curriculum in 1998. The principal finding was that creative artists need to be educated, as well as trained, in order to survive economically.”

Tony Klein, emeritus professor, University of Melbourne, *The Age*, August 27

“Putting aside what the University of Melbourne is doing to the Victorian College of the Arts in taking it over — that

is sad enough — the VCA will lose its autonomy as one of the world's great creative arts colleges. It is a situation that should never have arisen. The main culprits are politicians — state and federal — who have failed dismally to understand the place of the VCA in the community and, worse, their ignorance of its place, and that of the arts, in Australian culture.”

Tony Gould, *The Age*, May 26

“The only way people are learning to sustain a real career in the theatre, for example, is if they can write the play, act, make their own costume and sell the tickets. If they've got a whole package of skills, there's a very good chance they will be able to find a niche and sustain themselves. The idea of someone being a specialist is a very old view.”

VCAM dean, Professor Sharman Pretty, *The Australian*, June 5

“Some people don't want to be academics. They want to be actors who can really act, or singers who can really sing.”

Actor Geoffrey Rush, ABC-774 Radio, August 8

### **Web links**

Victorian College of the Arts

[www.vca.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.vca.unimelb.edu.au)

Melbourne University — Melbourne Model

[futurestudents.unimelb.edu.au/about/melbournemodel.html](http://futurestudents.unimelb.edu.au/about/melbournemodel.html)

Interview with Geoffrey Rush — ABC Radio

[www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=121556866361](http://www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=121556866361)

### **Your View**

What do you think of the Melbourne Model? Do you think some courses should be exempt? What effect do you think the Melbourne Model may have on VCAM?

*This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/the-art-of-the-matter-20090904-famk.html>*