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University tells MPs to butt out

Paul Austin
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Melbourne University has accused the State Opposition of undermining academic freedom by seeking to interfere in the university's management of the Victorian College of the Arts.

Acting vice-chancellor Susan Elliott has written a fiery letter to state MPs warning them to butt out of the university's business. In the letter, dated last Thursday and obtained by *The Age*, Professor Elliott says the Liberals are wrong to suggest the university, which controversially merged with the college in 2007, has broken a promise by cutting the number of specialist courses offered.

She condemns the Opposition over a motion, expected to be debated in the upper house this week, that expresses concern about changes the Liberals say the university is making to the college.

"Intervention in the curriculum details of a university by the legislature would be unprecedented in Victoria's history," Professor Elliott writes.

"As we undertake this challenge, we look to the Victorian Parliament to champion the principles of academic freedom through which universities in this state have sought to determine their destinies."

The Opposition hit back last night, accusing the university of damaging the college and then trying to silence criticism.

Liberal upper house leader David Davis said the State Government and the university had failed to keep commitments to Parliament that the college's role and character would be preserved after the merger.

"To now invoke a defence of academic freedom because the Parliament is seeking to debate in open forum the failure of the University of Melbourne and the State Government to live up to their commitments is a cynical abuse of principles of academic freedom," he said. "The university cannot strip the college of its schools, diversity, independence, academic staff and training while simultaneously condemning anyone who opposes this for intervening in the affairs of the university."

Mr Davis said that, far from protecting academic freedom, the university was stifling debate about its management of the college. He said the Opposition had been approached by several academic staff who were afraid to speak out "for fear of losing their jobs and potential retribution".

Professor Elliott's letter to upper house MPs was prompted by a motion by Liberal MP Bruce Atkinson that accuses the university of "limiting and cutting courses" offered by the college and of abandoning commitments that led Parliament to agree to the merger.

The motion says the university's actions are inconsistent with Government assurances to Parliament that the merger would "guarantee that the college's role as Australia's pre-eminent provider of visual and performing arts training and education can continue".

Professor Elliott says Mr Atkinson is wrong to say the university has not honoured its commitments.

"The University of Melbourne's commitment to specialist degrees and practical training in the arts has been proudly demonstrated for over 100 years," she writes.

"The Faculty of the VCA and Music proposes shortly to begin a process of wide consultation about its programs, including consultations with the community, to ensure its ongoing curriculum will offer programs in these art forms which match current international standards and best practice."

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/university-tells-mps-to-butt-out-20090914-fnvm.html>