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Guilty feet got no rhythm: VCA demolishes tap-dancing studio

The Victorian College of the Arts is battling another public relations disaster after a much-loved tap-dancing studio was demolished yesterday, with Liberal MP Bruce Atkinson condemning the move in state parliament as “an act of treachery.”

Three Southbank demountable buildings, housing a studio used by the dance and music school, costume facilities, the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts & Cultural Development and a 20-seat theatre known as “The Shed”, was razed by bulldozers yesterday morning, after VCA dean Sharman Pretty ruled that they were to be replaced by gardens.

But angry students, many of whom were attending parliament at the time of the demolition, claim they weren't consulted over the plans. Within hours, photos were posted online, alongside hundreds of angry comments indicating students had no idea of the facility's impending demise:





It is believed that the studios, which also housed a computer lab used by the school of production, were recently refurbished and that mirrors and floorboards were not removed before their appointment with the wrecking ball.

Late yesterday, six hours after the buildings were levelled, an email was distributed on behalf of VCA Dean Sharman Pretty apologising that “some staff” had not received warning of the works due to an IT glitch. However, students are not believed to have received either email.

A spokesperson for the VCA, Christina Buckridge, condemned the students’ protest, saying it was “remarkable that someone thought it worth posting photos of the demolition without enquiring what it was about”. She said the existing dance studio would be replaced by two new studios in a different building, and that a consultation process had been followed.

“There are two new studios, instead of one, and I’m struggling to comprehend what the issue is”, Buckridge added.

But former VCA Student Union President David Haidon told *Crikey* that the Wilin Centre would now be moved to where the defunct student union used to be, with the existing student union office shifted to a much smaller space. The fate of the much loved “Shed”, used by the production school for a second year project called “Set Pieces” since 2002, is unknown.

The buildings were inherited after the VCA Secondary School moved to nearby Sturt Street. But students say Professor Pretty was keen to save on rent to avert a funding shortfall. Under a controversial arrangement with the university, the VCA pays rent based on the number of square metres it occupies. In a recent email to students, VCA performing arts chief Kristy Edmunds foreshadowed cost-savings by reducing the college’s floorspace. The university charges the VCA \$250 per square metre in rent, or around \$6000 per student.

Yesterday afternoon in parliament Atkinson described the VCA’s rental arrangements as “ludicrous”.

As the bulldozers whirred, Victorian MPs from across the political spectrum lined up to condemn the recent changes to the college. A damning motion, moved by Atkinson, said the University was guilty of cutting courses and had abandoned various commitments, breaching the colleges’ parliamentary-enforced role as the “preeminent role as a provider of visual and performing arts training and education”.

Labor MLC Jaala Pulford backed the motion, saying she was in “furious agreement” with Atkinson. She said government funding per student at the VCA was \$10,000 compared to \$33,000 per student at rival arts

institutions such as NIDA. Pulford confirmed the college was now facing a \$6 million funding shortfall.

Greens MP Sue Pennicuik said the VCA problem "can and must be fixed". At its heart lay funding cuts enacted by former Education Minister Brendan Nelson, she said.

The motion arose after Opposition Leader Ted Baillieu sent an open letter to University management blasting the institution for imposing the controversial Melbourne Model on the college and promising a restoration of funding under a Liberal government. In response, the University of Melbourne Acting vice-chancellor Susan Elliott accused Baillieu of impinging on "academic freedom".

Leading critics, including thespian Geoffrey Rush, former Premier Jeff Kennett and former federal Arts Minister Race Mathews say the changes had curbed the institution's independence and detracted from the college's practical focus.

Crikey asked the University's media unit to respond to the motion this morning, but was told the parliamentary debate had been cut short and it would therefore be imprudent to comment.

