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Absurd game of pass the buck while arts college flounders

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The VCAM has produced some of our finest - it deserves better than this.

The fate of the Victorian College of the Arts and Music is becoming so absurdly tragic that it could be a worthy subject for one of its finest graduates - Academy Award winner and animator Adam Elliott, creator of that magnificently dark little film *Mary and Max*. What could a film about the Victorian College of the Arts and Music be titled? Perhaps, *The not so pretty story of dodging, weaving and infinite buck-passing*, because that is how the regrettable tale of the VCAM is reading.

The college, which is facing a \$6 million-a-year funding shortfall and threatened changes to its traditional teaching model, has been in limbo for the past 18 months as politicians and university managers fail to articulate a solution for its woes. Only state Opposition Leader Ted Baillieu has said anything remotely robust about it - in September last year, he vowed to provide up to \$6 million a year in recurrent funding to the VCAM if elected premier. Of course, it's strategic of him to do so with an election forthcoming. But at least Baillieu, who stands by his pledge, understands that unless something is done, and quickly, "we risk losing one of the most significant arts institutions in the nation".

Arts Minister Peter Batchelor, on the other hand, seems, at worst, to have washed his hands of the college, at best to have thrown them up in despair. Batchelor's recurring line is that the VCAM is funded through the federal government's Education Department, and therefore it's up to the federal government, and Education Minister Julia Gillard, to solve the problem. Technically, he's correct - but that's no excuse for inaction.

If Batchelor can announce a review of how to protect Melbourne's heritage street art, as he did last week, surely he can say something a little more constructive about the VCAM (which, after all, trains visual artists) than the refrain "we've always said that the federal government is responsible for funding universities and that should continue".

It's interesting to note, too, that the Brumby government had no trouble finding \$4.4 million in its recent budget to give to the white elephant that is the Docklands Film and Television Studio over the next two years.

In case you haven't been following the sorry saga of the VCAM, here's a synopsis. The Victorian College of the Arts used to be a relatively happy, relatively well-nourished little place in Southbank that produced some of the state's best-known artists: the aforementioned Elliott, and hosts of others, including director Ana Kokkinos, playwright Hannie Rayson, actor Vince Colosimo and sculptor Ricky Swallow.

Despite its current problems, the college's teaching methods are still garnering success, as highlighted by the story of recent graduate Ariel Kleiman, who just over a week ago picked up two awards at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival for his short student film *Deeper than Yesterday*.

Because the college is in the business of training students to become elite artists, the cost of teaching them is more expensive than the cost of simply lecturing students in huge auditoriums. Student-teacher ratios at the VCAM are low, teaching is intense and studio-based.

The federal funding model used to take into account the higher cost of the training. Then along came federal education minister Brendan Nelson. In 2004, Nelson flattened the funding model and the VCA found itself short-changed to the tune of about \$5 million a year. Nelson ordered the University of Melbourne, with which the VCA has long been affiliated, to pick up the shortfall. The university has begrudgingly been doing so ever since - under an agreement that ends next year.

The matter has come to a head in the past year with the appointment of Professor Sharman Pretty as dean of the VCAM. The school of film and television has been one of the hardest hit. The visual effects and documentary postgraduate streams were cut this year, and documents presented to staff several weeks ago propose that students start making films in pairs "as costs base needs to remain relatively stable".

The document also shows that student numbers in the film and television school should rise from 94 this year to a target of 145 by 2015 - with no extra teachers.

Ideally, any changes to the VCAM's curriculum should be on hold until the university responds to the recommendations made by the recently released review of the college.

The university says it will respond by August - another long wait for a college that has been left to languish for more than year.

Independently chaired by Dr Ziggy Switkowski, the review made no bones about the fact that the college desperately needs extra money from the university, the federal *and* state governments, and industry. The Switkowski review clearly states that it cannot simply be left to the University of Melbourne to come up with a solution. A new business model is needed - and one might look to the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (which is funded by the state and federal governments) for ideas.

How hard can it be for politicians and the university to sort something out? While they have floundered over the past year, the VCAM'S once proud and vibrant reputation has taken a battering. Its reputation can be restored, but the university and the state and federal governments must start taking the college's future seriously.

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