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Oscar winner animated over arts college

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AS ONE of Australia's great success stories, Oscar-winning animator Adam Elliot is often trotted out by state and federal politicians as a symbol of what can be achieved when governments invest in the film industry.

Elliot graciously accepts invitations to promote the industry. He sees it as a way of paying his dues.

But on this occasion he has stepped up to talk about a matter dear to his heart, one that politicians, state and federal, seem unable or simply unwilling to tackle - the future of the college that changed his life, the Victorian College of the Arts.

"I went in feeling insecure, low self-esteem, and I got pumped out feeling like the world is my oyster," Elliot says.

"If this [the college] dies, then don't expect any more Oscars, don't expect any more wonderful musicians, don't expect any more producers," he says, standing outside the college's heritage building in St Kilda Road.

Elliot is one of the college's best-known graduates, among an impressive roll call that includes actor Vince Colosimo, playwright Hannie Rayson, composer Liza Lim and visual artist Ricky Swallow.

"I used to say coming here was like watching *Fame* ... it's such a unique school, to have opera, music, drama, filmmaking, and it's this big melting pot of creativity," he says of the college, which also trains dancers and visual artists.

"I only did a one-year post-grad in 1996, and that one year totally changed me. I had never met a ballet dancer, but you'd be having your lunch sitting next to a ballet dancer, next to a cello player, next to an actor, and that's where all the creativity comes from."

But the college is now languishing in the aftermath of its 2007 merger with the University of Melbourne and funding cuts imposed by the Howard government in 2004. Chaired by Dr Ziggy Switkowski, a recent report on the faculty of the VCA and Music, as it is now known, confirmed what those on the ground already

knew - that the once-thriving institution is in desperate need of a new vision and adequate funding, at least an extra \$6 million a year.

In a city that values its cultural life, the VCAM's future has become an election issue.

State Opposition Leader Ted Baillieu has vowed to provide an extra \$6 million a year to the VCAM if the Liberals are elected, and the federal Greens candidate for the seat of Melbourne, Adam Bandt - who bears an uncanny resemblance to Elliot - has pledged to be an advocate for the VCAM if he is elected, a distinct possibility given Mr Bandt's performance at the last federal election. In 2007, he came second to Labor's Lindsay Tanner in the two-party preferred vote, and gained a 3.82 per cent swing in the Greens' favour.

"If the prospect of people in Melbourne voting Greens to save the VCA prompts Labor governments to spring into action over the coming weeks to come up with a plan, then I think that's great ... because this is actually an easy fix ... and it has to be fixed before the end of the year," Mr Bandt says.

His preferred solution, as proposed by the Save VCA group, is for the VCAM to be recognised as an institute of national cultural importance, renamed the Australian College of the Arts, and funded through the federal government's arts ministry, joining the likes of the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA), the Australian Ballet School and the National Institute of Circus Arts. This would entail an extra \$18 million of federal funds a year.

The University of Melbourne will respond to the Switkowski review by the end of next month.

A university spokesman yesterday told *The Age* that it remained "committed to supporting VCAM's fine work in training and educating current and future generations of Australian visual and performing artists."

But since its merger, the college has suffered crippling staff cuts, the loss of documentary, visual effects, puppetry and music theatre streams, and is facing the possibility of film students being asked to make films in pairs next year - a concept that horrifies Elliot.

"I would have dropped out. So would the other eight students in my [animation] stream. It's like saying to a painter, 'share a canvas', or a sculptor, 'here, you have one chisel'. It's like, 'forget it!' "

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/oscar-winner-animated-over-arts-college-20100709-1046c.html>