

Farrago

VCAM Dean resigns

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Controversial Dean of the Victorian College of the Arts and Music, Professor Sharman Pretty, has resigned, announced Acting Vice Chancellor John Dewar last night.

He also announced the [university's response \(http://www.unimelb.edu.au/vcam-discussion/downloads/university-response.pdf\)](http://www.unimelb.edu.au/vcam-discussion/downloads/university-response.pdf) to the Switkowski Review of the arts college's future, completed in May this year. The university has endorsed recommendations made by the review, including plans to suspend the introduction of the Melbourne Model at the VCAM for visual and performing arts disciplines, while considering a new curriculum.

The Faculty of the VCAM, formed by the 2009 merger of the VCA and the University of Melbourne Music Faculty, will remain a single institution, but it will now consist of two separate parts. These entities will be known as the VCA and the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, each led by a Director who will report to the Dean.

The new role of Dean will be "significantly different" to the role at the time of Dean Pretty's appointment, wrote Professor Dewar in an email to staff. "As a result Professor Pretty has decided to step down, as such a different role is not one that she would be interested to pursue," he wrote.

The university has also reaffirmed its commitment to studio practice, which it says should be central to tuition, and to talent-based entry.

At the opening of the Melbourne International Film Festival last night, Premier John Brumby acknowledged the significant role the VCA plays in the arts industry, [the Save VCA blog reported \(http://savevca.org/archives/1211\)](http://savevca.org/archives/1211). "Our Government is keen to ensure that a high level of studio-based training is maintained and enhanced in the future," he said.

"We are having constructive conversations with the Commonwealth on the future of the VCA – and I am determined to deliver a solution for a sustainable, vibrant and appropriately resourced VCA into the future," he added. "I hope to have more to say on this in the near future."

The institution faces a funding shortfall and requires an extra \$6 million a year, which state opposition leader Ted Baillieu has promised to provide if elected.

The news of Dean Pretty's resignation has attracted mainstream media attention, even during the federal election campaign, from outlets including [The Age \(http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/vca-chief-quits-amid-overhaul-](http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/vca-chief-quits-amid-overhaul-)

[20100723-10niw.html](#)) and *Crikey* (<http://www.crikey.com.au/2010/07/23/melbourne-uni-backflip-wont-save-vca/>).

Though the Dean has previously been nicknamed ‘Chainsaw’ due to her connection to funding and staffing cuts during her time at Auckland University, Professor Dewar told ABC Radio Melbourne’s Jon Faine this morning that he had “enormous admiration and respect” for her. “I think she’s withstood some incredible public demeaning and I think she’s done an amazing job in the circumstances,” he said.

“We’re going to have a curriculum review, in which the Melbourne Model will be an option, but we want to explore all the options,” he added.

Response from students has been cautious. VCAM Students’ Association Campus Co-ordinator Shane Woon told *Farrago* that he was surprised at the news of the resignation. “A lot of students at the VCA are celebrating a little too early,” he said. “The real change will only be seen with the outcome of the curriculum review.

He said this coming review is hoped to include one student from each of the affected schools—which each have different needs—in contrast to the Switkowski review, which featured only one undergraduate and one postgraduate.

He said there had been a “mixed response” from VCAM towards the Melbourne Model, which requires undergraduates to study six ‘breadth’ subjects from a different faculty as part of their degree. He said that although many Film and Television students didn’t want any more time taken away from their course, some singers wanted to study languages, for example.

Spokesperson for the activist group Save VCA, Scott Dawkins, told *Farrago* that students were able to make that choice when the two separate music schools were operating before the merger. “If they wanted breadth, go to Melbourne,” he said. “The kind of feedback that we’re getting is that people still want those two choices.”

Dawkins said it was “ridiculous” that musical theatre and puppetry courses had not yet been reintroduced. “The skill shortage is so obvious,” he said. He referred to work done on the King Kong Live on Stage show by a Melbourne animatronics company that employs 14 VCA graduates in its [puppet fabrication department](#) (<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2009/09/18/1253209001428.html>). “We’re importing people from Sydney to work on our films,” he added, referring to [a recent Age report](#) (<http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/movies/lights-camera-lots-of-action-20100614-ya7u.html>).

In terms of funding, “Our ultimate goal has always been VCA being a standalone Arts Ministry institution like NIDA,” he said. “Those schools get higher rates of funding that are appropriate for elite arts education. With that comes independence and curriculum independence.”

“We’re open to other solutions. Pre-2007 VCA operated quite happily as an affiliate of the University of Melbourne. That worked quite well,” he said.