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Clearing the stage at the VCAM

July 26, 2010 - 3:00AM

LIFE, as Tom Stoppard remarked in one of his plays, has "a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit as being an entrance somewhere else". Certainly, the integrity of the beloved and beleaguered Victorian College of Arts and Music seems a little more intact following the exit late last week of its controversial dean, Sharman Pretty. Her departure from centre stage was a result of the University of Melbourne's detailed response to the review of the struggling college conducted by Ziggy Switkowski. The review, which was implicitly critical of the direction Professor Pretty had taken the VCAM, only confirmed the vigorous criticism from the institution's staff, students, alumni and the wider arts world.

The dean's exit will, at least, enable the college to find new leadership perhaps more sympathetic to its charter of intense, studio-based training instead of the academically broader body it should never have become. It is also encouraging that the university has accepted most of the Switkowski recommendations. These include retaining the VCAM as a single faculty, but dividing it between Southbank, which retains most of the disciplines, and the Conservatorium of Music, at Parkville, each under the control of a director, reporting to a new dean (this new hierarchy is why Professor Pretty resigned). The university has also suspended the introduction of its Melbourne Model for the visual arts and performing arts courses, pending further assessment.

While these moves are welcome, they only partly assuage the VCAM's woes in other, more critical, areas that continue to blight its future. Since it merged with the University of Melbourne in 2007, the college has been in desperate need of adequate funding, and needs at least \$6 million a year to survive. The problem is that the VCAM is funded through the federal government's education department and is, strictly speaking, not a state responsibility. But there is hope: last Thursday, at the opening of the Melbourne International Film Festival, Premier John Brumby indicated he was talking with the federal government about more funding for the college, and that his government "would not rest" until a solution was found. Last year, Opposition Leader Ted Baillieu said, if elected, his government would provide the VCAM with up to \$6 million in recurrent funding.

One thing is certain. The VCAM has a special place in the culture not only of this city, but of this country. Its success is paramount.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/editorial/clearing-the-stage-at-the-vcam-20100725-10qij.html>