

Sharman Pretty: From Start to Finish

By [Sarah Adams](#) ArtsHub | Tuesday, July 27, 2010

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Sharman Pretty

The VCA has long been Victoria's most respected education institute for the arts. Their industry and practice-heavy style of learning has seen their alumni number among the ranks of Academy Award winner Adam Elliot, director Gillian Armstrong and actor Vince Colosimo; to name but a few. However, since funding cuts in 2005 the VCA began a tumultuous journey of mergers and staff cuts and their continuation as the organisation we knew seemed dubious, but with the resignation of controversial Dean Sharman "The Chainsaw" Pretty last week, the future integrity of our much beloved VCA seems to be looking up.

But let's start from the beginning shall we? Once upon a time there was an independent education institution in Melbourne, it was the little Centre for the Arts that could. One day, a Federal Education Minister known as Dr. Brendan Nelson came along who, despite the fact that he rode a motorbike, didn't seem to like University Students very much. Under the Howard government, he managed to abolish compulsory student union fees and allowed universities to raise HECS by 25 percent. But that wasn't all he did, in 2005 his restructure of the national "cluster" funding model resulted in an annual cut of \$5 million for the VCA.

That's a lot to bear when your programs include dance, drama, music, production, puppetry, film & TV, art and music theatre (the puppetry and music theatre programs have since been lost). These courses don't come cheap, which is why arts training institutions like NIDA, AFTRS and the Australian National Academy of Music are all funded at levels higher than university by Peter Garrett's federal Arts department.

So in 2007, out of dire need for funding, the Victoria Government merged the VCA with the University of Melbourne to create the "Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts". In 2009 the Faculty of Music was thrown into the mix to create VCAM. At the same time, Professor Sharman Pretty from the University of Auckland was brought in to help implement the infamous "[Melbourne Model](#)." She came with a reputation for being ruthlessly efficient with the New Zealand Herald reporting at the time that her tenure there was, for many, "the epitome of managerialism at the expense of traditional university values of collegiality and education for its own sake."

Within its first month VCAM cut 12 casual professional staff members, moved other staff onto different work agreements and implemented a freeze on hiring. Luke Buckmaster reported on Crikey.com.au at the time that this initial merger created an atmosphere of fear with Alison Hose of the Victorian College of the Arts Student Union (which closed in June 2009 due to lack of funding) quoted as saying, "It's pretty evident the university is ready to slash and burn... Staff are extremely concerned and everyone is walking around looking panic stricken about their jobs at the moment."

These were staff cuts that needed to happen in order to fit in with the controversial "Melbourne Model" of education, which has students doing broader, more academically based courses, before specifying their area of study in postgraduate education. This is in line with the American model of university education, and whilst a shake up for the university itself, it was prac-heavy courses like the ones that VCAM offered that would really suffer. Pretty herself struggled to defend the model that would see the current VCAM courses re-worked to accommodate a 25% "Breadth Study" component. On top of this would be a 25% decrease in semester length to align the VCAM with the UOM academic calendar, essentially resulting in a 50% reduction to the practical training hours offered in the current course.

In November last year the discussion paper *Defining the Future* was released by the university, which called for concerned parties to submit their theories for the best possible way forward for the VCA. An 'independent' review committee was established to review the findings and establish a series of formal recommendations. The committee was chaired by Ziggy Switkowski, and despite being purportedly 'independent' in fact only had two elected positions, with the remaining seven being personally appointed by Dean Petty and Vice Chancellor Glyn Davis. Of those seven, four were current VCAM heads of school, and three had been quite outspoken in their support for the Melbourne Model and/or the merger. Despite this, when the review committee did publish their report in May, one of their recommendations was to suggest that the implementation of the Melbourne Model be postponed until 2012, pending consultation.

The final review undermined everything that Petty had argued thus far, and affirmed the college's studio-based learning, intensive practice and performance heavy education style. The review stated, "This is an expensive form of education and training but underpins the distinctive culture of the VCA and Music and the competencies of its graduates."

On Thursday the 22nd of July Melbourne University released its response to the Switkowski review stating that, "The VCA will include the current schools of Art and Performing Arts, with the discipline of Film and Television to be recognised as a third school. The Parkville and Southbank music programs will become one school called the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music." Soon after this announcement, Dean Petty tendered her resignation, citing that after this structural reshuffle, the role of Dean is not one she would be interested in pursuing. Underpinning all of these changes is the dire need for government subsidy and despite the Petty's resignation the Melbourne Model has not been ruled out as an option and is still a reality for merged courses.

So this may seem like a move forward for VCAM, but the fight is not over yet. Speaking on ABC radio to 774 to Jon Faine on Friday, acting Vice Chancellor Professor John Dewar outlined how Petty's resignation was part VCAM's planned changed direction, "We do accept the recommendations of the Switkowski review but at the same time in reviewing curriculum we have to have a very firm eye on financial sustainability."

"We think we can do both: preserve studio teaching on the one hand while ensuring the long term financial sustainability with the delivery of curriculum," he added.

As reported by Emma Brown at [Inside Film](#) save VCA campaigner and college alumni Scott Dawkins said that while they welcomed the move, the fight for he and the 14, 000 other Save VCA members is not over yet. “The resignation of the Dean is good news but it’s not a silver bullet, she was acting on behalf of the university,” he said.

“New leadership is good but only if there is fresh thinking which is not apparent so far from the review as the economic rationalism language is still there.”

Ideally, the Save VCA group would like a standalone institution akin to AFTRS or NIDA in Sydney but news for the future of the organisation is not far away with Victoria Premier John Brumby and Education Employment and Workplace Relations Minister Simon Crean to deliver a funding announcement regarding the future of VCAM in the not too distant future.

Speaking at the Melbourne International Film Festival last Thursday, Victorian Premier John Brumby said, “We welcome the university’s response as an important first step. But I can tell you tonight that we are not resting on this issue. 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. I hope to have more to say on this in the near future.”

The Save VCA website reported yesterday the announcement of new leadership with Vice Chancellor Professor John Dewar stating, “After consultation with the relevant Heads of Schools, I [John Dewar] have appointed Associate Professor Su Baker as Director, VCA, and Prof Gary Macpherson as Director, Melbourne Conservatorium. Both appointments are effective immediately. The process of recruitment of a Dean will involve an international search, which we will commence shortly, and we will aim to have a new Dean in place by the start of 2011. In the meantime, I have asked Deputy Vice Chancellor (University Affairs) Prof Warren Bebbington to assume the role as Acting Dean, effective this Friday (30th July) until a new Dean is able to assume office.”

But what can you do? If you’ve managed to wade through all the statistics presented in this article, then you can be commended, and if by this paragraph you’ve decided that you would like to help, you can do so by joining the Save VCA [facebook group](#) and [subscribing](#) to their website. Also, at this election in just over three week’s time, make your vote count by finding out which parties can offer the best solution.



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