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Canvas

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THE announcements by the federal and state governments of plans for more than \$10 million in assistance to the Victorian College of the Arts squarely presents a challenge to the University of Melbourne and the VCA community.

We at the VCA will rise to this challenge and will do so in a visionary way, to meet the demands of a highly competitive, globalised arts environment.

Over the next few months we will be working assiduously to shape new programs with some available next year and others by 2012.

This week we began a curriculum review process at the Faculty of the VCA and Music, to discuss new courses and industry partnerships.

We now have a real opportunity to design programs that will suit the needs of the future - in contemporary art and music (including improvisation), composition, dance, theatre and production, music theatre, and the expanding world of film and animation, as well as new and emerging disciplines not currently offered.

This is an exciting prospect - we have a short time frame and we have to do it now. Over the next few months, the staff of the VCA and professional and industry partners will discuss what can be created to provide the best in new courses and programs. These programs will be interrelated and will stand as markers of excellence in the field. Students will be able to choose to work across mediums or specialise and build on their strengths.

We cannot legislate for creativity but we can facilitate it and create a sense of agency, of action. This happens from the early stages of learning to the mature phase. The hierarchy of knowledge does not progress neatly from the general to the specific but rather experience, insight and understanding deepen through study and training.

Institutions around the world are looking at what is the optimal way to produce good artists in all fields of creative endeavour. There are many models where immersive and experiential learning is an essential part, in which time and space are vital ingredients.

Why this discussion about the VCA has meant so much to people is that culture in many ways is the new nature. And culture is both local and global (I think the word these days is "glocal"). The arts is an international language spoken in the local dialect. This is true all over the world.

This partly explains why so many people feel a sense of ownership of the VCA. Their experiences as students, visitors, participants, patrons and beneficiaries of the new work that emerges every year makes this feeling real.

The VCA stands for an idea about the arts, one that represents what people want there to be here in Melbourne, for Australia and playing on the crowded international stage.

We are now 10 years into the 21st century and this is an exciting time to be evolving such a place with a new mandate. In the new broadband-enabled society ahead of us, in a culturally diverse and conflicted world, communication and cultural exchange will create new modes of art and culture that we have yet to imagine, and we look forward to contributing to this future.

The recent intense and heartfelt discussion in the media and in the professional and broader communities has focused on the relationship between the VCA and the University of Melbourne, which began - formally - in 2007. In July, the university adopted the recommendations of the Switkowski review and restored the VCA's name and appointed a director.

It also affirmed the principles of talent-based entry as a method of selection into the course - meaning through interview, audition and other discipline-specific measures of merit. Also affirmed is the centrality of studio-based learning, clearly stating that the centrepiece of our teaching has always been, and will remain, studio-based practice.

While acknowledging a commitment to excellence in contemporary arts training and education, these courses can be distinct from the Melbourne Model programs as offered in other parts of the university.

It is tempting to say the VCA is back. However, this is not about a reinstatement; it is a chance for a new statement about what is best for a 21st century arts education and for the training of artists, performers, composers, filmmakers - all makers of new work - and the timely reinvention and renewal of disciplines that make up the vibrant contemporary arts environment.

Recognition of this in this week's announcements by state and federal governments is welcome and I have no doubt that we will prove a worthy recipient of this confidence.

We will be asking people to come with us as we work through this exciting challenge.

Associate Professor Su Baker is the new Director of the VCA

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/canvas-20100810-11yat.html>