Monday, 9 November 2009

University of Melbourne spinning themselves a lie on VCA

On November 5, 2009, you published a "**correction (http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/11/05/comments-corrections-clarifications-and-cckups-117/)**" to Andrew Crook's story ("**Ill will across Melbourne uni claims another victim (http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/11/03/ill-will-across-melbourne-uni-claims-another-victim/)**") supplied by Christina Buckridge, manager, corporate affairs, University of Melbourne.

I am writing to correct the correction. Buckridge said:

> Andrew Crook cavalierly claims in his article that "A damning survey showed 40% of VCA staff would quit their positions rather than deal with further rationalisation directives from new dean Sharman Pretty. At the same meeting, 84% of staff expressed a vote of no-confidence in Pretty".
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> To set the record straight:
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> The meeting referred to in the statement was held on October 14, 2009 and organised by the "SAVE VCA" campaign. The university understands it was an informal gathering of approximately 40 staff members — which is approximately 20-25% of the Faculty of the VCA and Music (VCAM) staff members in total.

All staff at VCAM Southbank (the former VCA) were sent an email invitation to a "Critical VCAM Staff Meeting" by film lecturer Ros Walker. Forty-eight staff attended included one head of school. There was nothing "informal" about it. The purpose was to refine the staff's proposal for a curriculum consultation process. It was around a quarter of Southbank staff — a good representation given that many VCAM staff are part-time, and many others are practising artists who only teach one or two days a week.

Item two on the agenda was an anonymous staff ballot run by the National Tertiary Education Union. It was held to find out if perceptions about the depth of unhappiness at the faculty were correct. Forty four staff completed the ballot and staff were given the option to abstain from answering any question. Results were relayed back to the staff during the meeting.

Key survey results included:

- 37 out of 44 staff (84%) had no "confidence in the management of the current Dean of VCAM" (an additional three staff members were "undecided")
- 17 out of 44 staff (39%) "plan to seek employment outside of VCAM in the next 12 months"
- 31 out of 44 staff (70%) of staff were undecided or thought their professional advice had not been sought in "consultations about curriculum changes that have happened or are under way".

It's clear from this sample group that the dean's leadership is not generating confidence, there is an imminent threat of talented teaching staff leaving VCAM and UoM "consultation" processes have not engaged with staff.

Buckridge goes on:

The views of staff in attendance at this particular meeting are not representative of the views of all VCAM staff.

Unfortunately, the University of Melbourne have made no move to garner the opinions of all VCAM staff. In lieu of that, I would have thought a 25% sample was pretty good litmus test. Newspoll certainly rely on a lot less.

Meanwhile, vice-chancellor Glyn Davis was **hitting the airwaves (http://www.facebook.com/video/video.php? v=178396116361)** last week to play the victim:

Jon Faine: Do you commit to consulting with the broader community? I understand the university's quite surprised at that depth of emotion and feeling from the graduate community from VCA and the arts community in Melbourne. Do you now listen?

Glyn Davis: Yes but the suggestion is that we weren't listening before.

Faine : That is the feeling people were given.

Davis: That's the perception it doesn't mean it is the reality.

Really Mr Davis? But your publicist wasn't too keen on listening to the views of 25% of your VCA staff?

According to Buckridge:

No poll has been taken or other survey conducted of all VCAM staff on the subject matter of dean Pretty's leadership.

Yes good point — when is that poll happening? Certainly overdue isn't it?

We're hearing the word "consulting" a lot from UoM. Indeed, Glyn Davis announced only on Friday that the elusive VCA "discussion paper" will now happen sometime in the first quarter of next year. This sounded promising until he clarified that UoM would hand pick the "group of people drawn from staff and students and external arts community who will consult with people both inside and outside the institution."

Why doesn't UoM just save everyone the time and tell us what the "discussion paper" results will be now? That is:

- Melbourne Model = Good
- Specialised and practical-based studio training = old view
- Dean Pretty = effective financier saving VCA from itself and;
- The concerns of staff, student, alumni and arts industry = misinformation.

I'm not quite sure what happened to the "fully independent, transparent" and "inclusive of independent and civic stakeholders" review undertaken of the VCA's curriculum and pedagogy, together with other matters, including its finances and funding requirements", which Davis **promised (http://savevca.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/09-09-09-The-Age.pdf)** to all living former Victorian arts ministers back in August.

Maybe it's like the promise vice-chancellor Davis made to Victorian arts minister Lynne Kosky that all VCA courses **would remain 75% specialised (http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/08/27/2668422.htm)** under the Melbourne Model. Davis forgot to mention that "specialised" doesn't necessarily mean practical/studio based training (just ask a VCAM first year music student whose credit points for practical subjects drop by 31.25% from next year). Did Davis also mention to Kosky that VCAM semesters are being cut by up to 25% from 2010 "to move to a less intensive teaching delivery model that aligns to the University academic calendar", according to the VCAM 2010 Business Plan?

Buckridge claims:

Given that the phrase "84% of staff expressed a vote of no-confidence in Pretty" is factually incorrect and potentially

defamatory to Professor Pretty, these facts should be noted.

It seems the only thing Buckridge's "correction" has achieved is drawing attention to UoM's outrage that 25% of VCAM staff dare express their opinion.

Note, Buckridge takes no issue with **_Crikey_ revealing (http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/11/03/ill-will-across-melbourne-uni-claims-another-victim/)** that the VCAM staff present voted against implementation of the "Responsible Division Management" staffing changes (as did the UoM Law School) or that 17 highly skilled, valuable staff members from this group are actively seeking to leave VCAM. Buckridge doesn't dispute the claim that RDM process leaves only 3% of VCAM professional staff in unchanged positions.

Buckridge doesn't blink an eye about the resignation of Elizabeth Baré, the head of university services (and architect of RDM) or the "growing sense of ill will engulfing the university's several campuses".

This attitude is much like the acting-vice-chancellor telling Victorian Upper House MPs to **keep their opinions to themselves (http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/university-tells-mps-to-butt-out-20090914-fnvm.html)** when they went to debate the SAVE VCA motion in August (which they nonetheless passed unanimously).

Let's cut the spin, University of Melbourne.

The university can "consult" and "discuss" as much as they like. The day-to-day reality at VCA is staff opinions are shot down, courses have been cut and practical curriculum content will be lost from next year.

UoM should know by now VCA staff, students, alumni and industry will not stand by and watch this senseless trashing of an Australian arts icon.

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