

University of Melbourne no longer the pick

- Andrew Trounson
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UNIVERSITY of Melbourne vice-chancellor Glyn Davis has warned that adverse publicity over its takeover of the Victorian College of the Arts and staff cuts had hurt the university.

But he dismissed as tenuous suggestions that the needed cost savings were a driver behind a steep drop in first preferences. He said the drop was no more than anticipated as the university made the transition to its Melbourne model of graduate schools, which he said wouldn't appeal to all.

"Negative publicity hurts," Professor Davis told the HES. "There has been a drop in preferences for the VCA, which reflects the criticisms of the VCA ... and I'm sure the issues around staffing don't help. But to link these two things together is pretty tenuous."

Melbourne's early first preferences among school-leavers fell 14 per cent to 8372, ranking it behind rivals Monash, RMIT and Deakin in the popularity stakes. Before the transition to the Melbourne model last year it had consistently been No 1.

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At the VCA, where Melbourne has faced a high-profile campaign against proposals to integrate it more closely with the university curriculum, first preferences dropped by 27 per cent to 1281.

On the plus side, first preferences for its new generation degrees are up 3 per cent, and first preferences for its graduate teaching course were up 34 per cent.

In shifting to graduate entry for professions Professor Davis said Melbourne was up against 150 years of history. This year graduate entry was discontinued for courses such as dentistry and veterinary science, joining the likes of law as postgraduate only.

"We know what the price of the strategy is, but the upside is that the students we are getting are fabulous. They are committed, this is the sort of education they want and they have chosen it."

First preferences of more than 8000 still point to strong demand, given available undergraduate places are just 5000.

In an email to staff, new provost John Dewar said first preferences weren't a measure of quality, noting that Cambridge ranks at just 61st in Britain in terms of numbers of applicants. He said demand for postgraduate courses next year was rising "healthily".

But among some staff there is unease that the drop in preferences is at least partly a result of the job losses and cost cutting.

Verity Burgmann, of the school of social and political sciences, said many staff were concerned the cost cutting was taking a toll.

"The Melbourne model might not have deterred students if it had been better funded," she said. "I used to lecture to about 350 undergraduates in three courses each year. This year I have lectured to 640 in three courses plus team lecturing to another 420. Most colleagues have had large increases. So the students are more crowded and the staff are more stressed."

Last week Melbourne signalled it would accept 218 voluntary redundancies, under its previously announced cost-cutting plan to save \$30 million. Professor Dewar said only 44 cut positions were academics out of total academic staff of 3300 and the cuts wouldn't hurt teaching programs. The arts faculty is seeking to fill 25 new positions after years of cuts.

Although no further cuts were planned under the university-wide cost initiative, some faculties and budget divisions might need to shed more positions.

The National Tertiary Education Union, which is in an extended pay fight with the university and has opposed the job cuts, said it believed the fall in first preferences partly reflected the focus on cut cutting.

"A drop of that magnitude is damning of the current shift in focus of the university to constant staff reductions, continuous restructuring and cost cutting, and away from students," NTEU branch president Ted Clark said.

But rather than first-preference numbers, the main game for Melbourne is ensuring enough students choose to go on to postgraduate study.

Melbourne will be looking to not just fill its graduate commonwealth-supported places but to attract enough fee-paying graduate students to help cover the higher cost of postgraduate education.

Professor Davis is lobbying the federal government to provide a loading for postgraduate places and reiterated his call at a conference on Monday.

The test will be in 2011 after the first cohort graduates from the new generation degrees and move into postgraduate study. That is when the government's review of course funding rates is due to report. It is also when there is a review clause in Professor Davis's contract that goes out to 2015.

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