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Mass exodus at VCA as music staff exit stage left

by [Andrew Crook \(http://www.crikey.com.au/author/andrewcrook2/\)](http://www.crikey.com.au/author/andrewcrook2/)

The Victorian College of the Arts' music school is facing an uncertain Christmas after 20% of its academic staff, including several world-renowned experts, opted for early retirement in the wake of controversial changes to the prestigious institution.

Crikey can reveal that at least seven experienced staff members out of a total talent pool of 35, including respected head of opera Dr David Kram, head of orchestra Marco van Pagee and head of strings Miwako Abe, will depart the school this week, leaving tense students in the lurch.

Leading pianist and conductor Joan Pollock, head of masters Dr Barry Bignell, and veteran administrator Andreina Smith will also to exit stage left under the University of Melbourne's program of voluntary redundancies announced in July. None of the positions will be replaced, however there is chance some staff will be re-hired as casuals or part-time consultants. Many retiring staff are believed to be bound by confidentiality agreements.

Fourteen-year opera veteran Dr Kram told *Crikey* that the departures stemmed from controversial changes to the institution that are currently the subject of a review led by former Telstra chief Ziggy Switkowski.

"I didn't want to get bogged down in administration, I'd rather keep my creative juices boiling", he said.

Dr Kram said he will remain a senior fellow and focus more on his independent production efforts.

One VCA insider told *Crikey*: "There's definitely a perception that the staff members are making the decision to take the package now, rather than deal with the upheaval next year."

It is understood that the VCA music school's amalgamation at the beginning of the year with the university's theory-based Parkville music school increased pressure on several staff to take early retirement as their positions diminished in stature. Last week, 14 Parkville staff signed a letter claiming the Switkowski review was in danger of overlooking its 115-year contribution to the arts, claiming it was focused too heavily on the VCA.

The exodus has also engulfed other wings of the institution. In addition to the casualties in music, two leading dance staff members, classical ballet scion Robert Ray and senior lecturer Janne Blanche, have decided to jump ship, while the head of documentaries at the film and TV school, Steve Thomas, will also depart. And another 16 non-academic professional staff have taken advantage of the university's offer, including several from the film and TV school and four from art.

Crikey understands the casualty list could grow further next year when the university implements another round of staged retirements.

One music student enrolled next year, who did not want to be named, said they were devastated by the departures and accused the university of a lack of consultation when most students were absent from campus.

“Students are always the last to know. They’re making sure the we can’t have a voice because they’re running information sessions after the academic year has finished. It’s outrageous that when you’ve got a new group of students about to start their course that have been kept in the dark.”

Last month, [Crikey \(.../2009/11/26/vca-accidentally-leaks-its-own-website-attacking-critics/\)revealed \(.../2009/11/26/vca-accidentally-leaks-its-own-website-attacking-critics/\)](#) that the VCA had penned an attack website slamming its critics, which claimed “no staff member from the faculty of the VCA and music has been or will be sacked” and promised “a clear and open consultation process with staff, students and the arts community”. The website was swiftly removed from the web following *Crikey’s* queries.

A spokesperson for the University of Melbourne, Christina Buckridge, confirmed the redundancies, but said they were only approved after “satisfying efficient and effective operation of strict criteria”. Not all were in full-time positions, she said.

National Tertiary Education Union branch president Ted Clark said the “substantial number of departures presented a difficult future”. Maintaining music performance levels next year would be “difficult”, Clark said.

The university is currently embroiled in a stoush with staff over Dr Switkowski’s review of the VCA’s direction. Last week, controversial VCA dean Sharman Pretty reportedly told a staff meeting she would “consider” a request to install a representative on the review panel. The university has also released a discussion paper to canvass options for the VCA’s staged adoption of vice-chancellor Glyn Davis’ heavily-criticised Melbourne Model.

Tomorrow afternoon at the VCA’s Christmas drinks, *Crikey* understands remaining staff will wear black armbands to mourn their retiring colleagues. Those leaving will don yellow bands as a sign of their impending freedom.

The logo for Crikey, featuring the word "crikey" in a lowercase, sans-serif font. The letters "cri" are in red, "key" is in green, and the "i" is a smaller red dot.