

Monday 8<sup>th</sup> February 2010

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The VCA Review Committee  
C/- University of Melbourne

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**Re: Discussion Paper**

Dear Review Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to have input into the future of the Victorian College of the Arts. I write to you as an Arts industry professional with a strong, proud association with the VCA, and in particular the Music Theatre department.

As a graduate of The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts', with a Bachelor of Arts (Music Theatre, I have thorough understanding of the need for such elite practical training to be as complete and rigorous as possible. And as a working actor, currently performing in The Drowsy Chaperone with the Melbourne Theatre Company, and with a vast and varied experience over the 6 years since graduation both locally and internationally, I know that such unique, specialised training is essential for the application of fully-developed, exceptional skills and talents required in the business.

I have been thrilled to come to the VCA to enjoy a range of performances on offer over the last 6 years, and I have consistently been blown away by the inspiring standard of performance executed by the students.

In reference to the Discussion Paper, I offer the following:

**Curriculum**

I support the retention of the VCA as an elite arts training institution with a focus on intensive, practical, studio-based training. VCA should continue to offer degree-award courses across all art streams including Drama, Dance, Music Theatre, Production, Art, Music and Film and Television.

I do not believe there is a need to add 'breadth' to the VCA programs through the introduction of the Melbourne Model.

I believe any move away from the intensive, studio-based training in defined areas of specialisation threatens the ability of VCA's students to compete with graduates of other schools like NIDA and WAAPA, and would make VCA graduates less work-ready. This would in turn impact upon arts business by causing a decline in the availability of Victorian-based graduate artisans with the skills required to enter the workforce.

I do support regular curriculum review at VCA to ensure the College continues to meet the rapidly changing demands of students and their future employers. All reviews should include extensive consultation with all stakeholders and operate independently from VCA and University of Melbourne (UoM) management.

## **Funding & Structure**

I support the view that the optimum outcome for VCA is to be an independent institution, capable of awarding its own degrees and managing its own curriculum.

Accordingly, I suggest that direct Arts Ministry funding (through inclusion in the Australian Roundtable program) at levels comparable to NIDA, is the best hope for a financially sound, independent VCA. I encourage the UoM to aggressively pursue this option, drawing upon the great public and industry interest in VCA evident in recent times.

In the interim, I support calls for the Federal Government to immediately reverse the 2005 \$5m p/a funding cut to VCA. I believe the Federal Government is putting great strain on both the University and VCA by holding off on this review until 2012, and is thereby threatening elite arts education in Australia.

I also support calls for the Victorian Government to commit to sustained funding for VCA to supplement the Federal contribution. I support the Victorian Shadow Minister for the Arts' suggestion that this sum be in the ballpark of \$6m p/a or alternatively in the guise of a sustained contribution to VCA infrastructure development.

I support the demerger of UoM Music and VCA Music from the 2011 academic year. I believe this outcome would return choice to the music education sphere, so that students can choose between a Melbourne Model based degree with strong ties to scholarship and research (UoM Music) and completely practical, studio-based training (VCA Music). Demerger would also address the unworkable constraints of having two music campuses. I support this demerger regardless of whether VCA remains a faculty of the University or becomes independent.

As secondary structural options, I would also support investigation of VCA being transferred to another University that was willing to retain the practical nature of VCA's courses OR VCA becoming an autonomous VET institution. In either case, the Federal and State Governments would need to recognise the unique cost of providing elite arts education and fund VCA's new guise appropriately.

I support the pursuit of new income streams (e.g. extended post-graduate programs, open programs, pursuing international students) and believe VCA's best chance of obtaining this income is by committing to the supply of intensive, studio-based training which is most attractive to the arts education marketplace.

## **Leadership**

I am concerned the current senior leadership of Victorian College of the Arts & Music does not necessarily represent the views of the current staff and students. As such, I would support a review of VCAM management as part of any structural and/or funding changes, with particular preference for allowing students and staff a direct say in appointments of the Dean, Deputy Dean and Heads of School.

I support a greater, active involvement by both the Victorian State and Federal Governments at VCA, to ensure Australia's arts education and arts business landscapes are better safeguarded than has been evident throughout 2009.

## **Accountability**

I would urge the University of Melbourne to address contraventions of the Heads of Agreement that merged UoM with VCA. Particularly:

- Reinstating the VCA name.
- Reinstating the VCA logo.
- Reinstating VCA's unique graduation ceremony.
- Reversing the alignment of VCA and UoM's funding arrangements, which was not due until the fifth year of integration.
- And in the interim of VCA's future being decided, UoM should allow VCA "to continue to exercise high levels of autonomy over the conduct and future development of its educational programs [including] the VCA's commitment to provide individual and small group tuition within an arts practice environment with an emphasis on context, performance, production and exhibition and with studio practice as its core."

## **Students & Staff**

I express concern that many talented and valuable teaching staff will not be returning to VCA in 2010.

I also express concern that suggestions the Melbourne Model would be applied to VCA, and news of staff leaving, may have impacted upon VCA's attractiveness to high calibre applicants.

As such, I would support new mechanisms to actively retain quality staff, such as formal, quarterly opportunities for VCA staff to supply feedback to VCAM Management (both anonymously and publicly).

I would also encourage a renewed drive to attract high calibre students as part of any 're-launch' of an independent VCA, through emphasising the College's continued commitment to providing 100% practical education across the entire arts spectrum.

## **Future**

I look forward to VCA emerging from the turmoil of the last year as a stronger institution, capable of answering student demand for the highest level of intensive, wholly practical-based, studio training across the entire arts spectrum. I am confident the protection of this ideal will ensure VCA graduates will continue to have the best chance of making a career in one of the most competitive industries in the country. In doing this, we also support a vibrant Australian artistic culture and ever-expanding arts business.

Yours sincerely,  
Alex Rathgeber