

12 February 2010

Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance
Level 3, 365 Queen Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

The VCA Review Committee
C/- University of Melbourne

By email: vcam-feedback@unimelb.edu.au

Re: Discussion Paper

Dear Review Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to have input into the future of the Victorian College of the Arts. We write to you as the Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance (“the Alliance”) – the trade union and professional organisation for all practitioners in the arts and entertainment industry. Membership includes: actors, dancers, musical theatre performers, theatre and film/television crews, arts administrators, animators, puppeteers, set designers and symphony orchestra & other musicians. Many Alliance members are VCA graduates.

Our relationship with students at VCA begins early in their training and continues when they finish their studies and move to professional employment in the industry. The Alliance always notes how work-ready, savvy and informed VCA Graduates are, which comes directly from the elite, intensive, practice-based and specialised training at VCA.

Levels of interaction:

Alliance members interact with VCA students on many levels, with benefits of these links felt across the arts and entertainment industry. Our industry’s relationship with the pre eminent tertiary training provider is very important to the rich cultural life of Victoria.

Sessional tutors

Many arts industry professionals are engaged by VCA to share their expertise with the students as guest lecturers or sessional tutors, providing not only a living wage for these professionals, but a wonderful opportunity for students to learn and interact with experienced practitioners. This demonstrates the interconnectedness of the industry.

Student Films

As part of their studies, VCA students collaborate in a unique artistic environment with professional actors when producing or directing these performers in a film / play. This allows actors to further hone their craft and maintain that integral connection to ‘up-and-comers’ in the industry; while for the students, working with Alliance members is an important part of their training.

Mentoring

The Alliance coordinates a successful mentoring program for young performers and graduates, matching them with skilled and knowledgeable performers who provide advice, share practical tips and offer a friendly sounding board.

These links between all stages of careers in the industry might be jeopardised should VCA become too much like a regular university, as professionals may be less inclined to 'give back' to the new generation of practitioners if they are receiving only a more generalised arts degree.

In reference to the Discussion Paper, the Alliance offers the following feedback:

Curriculum

The Alliance supports 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, Puppetry, Art, Music and Film and Television.

We strongly believe there must be no compromise on providing 100% practical, intensive and specialist training, nor should students be expected to forgo a degree qualification to get this training. Any compromise here completely goes against why VCA exists.

We do not believe there is a need to add 'breadth' to the VCA programs through the introduction of the Melbourne Model. Students come to VCA for specialisation, not for breadth. .

We 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.

We support regular curriculum reviews 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.

Music Theatre

In particular, the Alliance believes it is vitally important for Music Theatre to remain a part of the VCA curriculum. This popular and important degree must be reinstated. Dean Sharman Pretty endorsed "inter-practice learning" in an interview in the Australian newspaper on 5/6/2009. Music Theatre (singing, acting, dancing) seems to be the best example of this "inter-practice learning," thus it seems quite astonishing that it was suspended at all. Musicals are the mainstay of the large house heritage theatres here in Melbourne – The Princess, Her Majesty's, The Comedy, the Athenaeum, and the Regent. The impact of suspending the music theatre course will most certainly impact on the future of Melbourne as the "arts capital" of Australia.

With the Victorian government seeking to position Melbourne as the home of first-run commercial musicals, it makes good economic sense for the VCA to continue training the singing, acting, dancing performers in the intensive Music Theatre degree and the multi-skilled behind-the-scenes practitioners in the existing curriculum. Elite arts training should support this vision of Melbourne.

Animation and digital media

The Victorian government also aims to extend "Victoria's reputation as Australia's foremost location for ... the development of new and emerging media content" (Our Vision on Screen 2009.) Therefore, it is vitally important that the brightest minds in this area receive their elite training in this state, at the VCA, and continue on to work in Victoria, in this rapidly growing market.

Funding & Structure

The Alliance supports 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, we suggest that direct federal 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.

We 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, the Alliance supports calls for the Federal Government to immediately reverse the 2005 \$5 million per annum funding cut to VCA, (updated to 2010 figures.) We 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.

The Alliance also supports calls for the Victorian Government to commit to sustained funding for VCA to supplement the Federal contribution. We support the Victorian Shadow Minister for the Arts' suggestion that this sum be in the ballpark of \$6m per annum or alternatively in the guise of a sustained contribution to VCA development.

The Alliance supports the demerger of UoM Music and VCA Music from the 2011 academic year. 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. We support this demerger regardless of whether VCA remains a faculty of the University or becomes independent.

As secondary structural options, the Alliance 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.

If VCA must continue as a Faculty of the University however, UoM must accept and embrace the fact VCA will never fit neatly into the Melbourne Model brand and structure. This is especially apparent when looking at the burden placed on VCA when forced to meet UoM's rental requirements

Instead of this being seen as troublesome, the uniqueness of VCA should be seen as an opportunity to develop a new, elite arts education brand within the University (much the same way Edith Cowan University has fostered WAAPA).

The Alliance supports 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

The Alliance would like to see the leadership of the VCA actively seek the participation and involvement of the arts and entertainment industry when moving forward and planning the future of the VCA. This was sadly lacking in the lead-up to this review.

We 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

The Alliance urges 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

The Alliance expresses concern that many talented and valuable teaching staff will not be returning to VCA in 2010, particularly sessional tutors currently working as professional practitioners in the arts industry.

We 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, we 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).

We 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

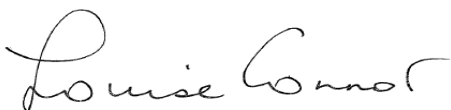
The Alliance looks forward to VCA emerging from the turmoil of the last year as a stronger institution, capable of answering student demand for the highest level of intensive, wholly practical-based, studio training across the entire arts spectrum. We are confident the protection of this ideal will ensure 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.

The Alliance would appreciate an opportunity to meet with the Review Committee to further expand on our submission.

Film & TV Working Party

Please note, the Alliance also endorses the submission made by the Victorian Film and Television Working Party, of which we are a member.

Yours sincerely,



Louise Connor
Victorian Branch Secretary
Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance