

Response to discussion paper, 'Defining the Future for the VCA and Music at the University of Melbourne'

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Allow me to begin by correcting one factual item of information in the discussion paper. I refer you to page 10 and the statement that, 'The integration of the VCA with the University of Melbourne in 2007 had the same initial motive of the mergers in the UK—to build ... a broader range of course possibilities ...'

From the VCA perspective this is simply not true. I served on the VCA governing council for some eight years or so before walking out of the meeting when the merger was ratified: in the final vote only I, plus one of the two student representatives on council, voted against integration. But the fact that the majority voted for it does not necessarily mean they saw the merger as a desirable development. Most, I believe, voted for it because they believed this to be the only way out of an impasse.

Escape from the impasse was the motive. And the impasse was a financial crisis created by the then Federal Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson. Up till then the VCA had been efficiently and responsibly managed, delivering high quality studio education in arts practice—even though the commonwealth subsidy per student had always been at a critically low level when compared to similar institutions such as NIDA and AFTERS. Once Nelson announced his reforms everything changed.

The policy embedded in the Nelson reforms, providing the same flat rate of subsidy per student regardless of what they were studying, was plainly out of touch with the reality of teaching needs. As the minister must have been aware, it does not cost the same to educate a surgeon as it does to educate an economist—nor does it cost the same to educate a historian as it does to educate an opera singer. One would have thought this was obvious. Some fields of education require immensely expensive equipment, some require one-on-one coaching, others require nothing more than a large hall, a lot of seats and a lecturer. The policy was ill-advised, simplistic and smacked of political and administrative opportunism.

The implication was that each institution would find its own formula for spreading costs to make possible the continuance of a variety of courses.

This was all very well for large institutions with many faculties, where the mismatch of subsidy *vis-a-vis* needs could be successfully and relatively simply amortised over a broad range of studies. Indeed, the University of Melbourne itself received an annual increase, a windfall of some \$11 million, as a result of the new funding formula. Small specialist institutions, by contrast, suffered. In the case of VCA the consequence was a shortfall of some \$5 million. And it was a mortal blow. High level studies in the art of violin playing (for example), or contemporary dance techniques, require individual tuition and an immense commitment by the student to rehearsals and practice outside class hours. Studio education, as practical training, is a wholly different proposition to the standard academic model. Overnight, the very existence of VCA was under threat. Something had to be done. The college could not continue offering courses without the means of guaranteeing it could afford to deliver them.

So, a three-person deputation from VCA travelled to Canberra to explain the problem to the minister (and I can be certain about this, as I was a member of the deputation), but he declined to see us. The message conveyed by Nelson's blunt behaviour clearly suggested that the ruinous consequences of his reforms to VCA's enrolled students were apparently of little concern to him. Indeed he never responded to this issue, apart from writing letters that reiterated his 'solution' that it was a matter to be sorted out between VCA and the University of Melbourne.

From this time on, the chief discussion around the VCA Council table was how to save the college. Various strategies were considered at length. UoM meanwhile graciously agreed to make up the \$5 million shortfall, pending a more permanent solution. This \$5 million is referred to on page 3 of the discussion paper as 'a significant diversion of resources intended ... for programs from across the University of Melbourne'. (Of course, the University of Melbourne, meanwhile, was in receipt of the \$11 million windfall). Understandably the university was not happy about the prospect of making up any such shortfall in perpetuity. And one of the proposed solutions, despite my own persistent and outspoken opposition, was total integration.

Well, as we know, this is what happened. And since that decision the consequences have followed a trajectory almost exactly fulfilling my predictions (which other members of the council had thought alarmist and overstated). I was never in any doubt that the merger meant the end of a beautiful and unique little college, a college based on the belief that the creative imagination and expressive skills are every bit as profound as academic analysis, criticism or commentary. My own stated view, at the last meeting I attended, was that a symphony by Mozart—or Ross Edwards, for that matter—is more profound, more intellectually rigorous and of greater value to society than all the books written about him by musicologists. My fears on behalf of the

students were based on the fact that, during my lifetime of professional dedication to my artform (literature), I have not found this to be a view shared by academics.

I also warned that integration may not turn out to be a happy experience for the university either.

My three main reasons for re-entering the debate are as follows:

1. To correct the notion that the motive for the merger, from the VCA's point of view was to 'broaden the courses'—during my years on the council the proposition of a merger was never raised prior to the axe-blow of the Nelson reforms.
2. To refute any implication that the VCA was not responsibly managed while it was independent. Quite the contrary, the old VCA delivered quality training in arts practice on the funding granted it—meagre though that was, in my opinion—without any ongoing deficit.
3. To point out that one contextual fact is conspicuously missing from the issues as laid out in the present discussion paper: the real estate value of the VCA campus. To put the university's \$5 million outlay per annum in perspective, the VCA campus, based on valuations commissioned by the VCA Council three or four years ago, must now be worth well in excess of \$400 million.

### *Summary*

It should be clearly stated and understood that there was no crisis within the college until the Federal Government imposed one, nor was there an aspiration to be fully integrated with the University of Melbourne.

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