

Victorian College of the Arts: documentary lecturer rages on the ruin, asks the central question..



by: [Steve Thomas](#)

Screen Hub

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Fallout from the ingestion of the Victorian College of the Arts Film and Television School by Melbourne University, continues to spread. Steve Thomas, no longer the documentary lecturer, takes up the story, in a year when the course is not being offered at all.

After lobbying and outcry, Melbourne University implemented a review of the transformation of VCA late last year.

The documents are [here](#). They include the 136 written submissions from outside the current staff.

A few key facts emerge quickly. The great majority favour retaining the VCA as a separate institution, which provides intensive training in the various art forms at its core.

The "crisis" at VCA was created entirely by government. Brendan Nelson standardised the cost-per student, which made intensive practical education in small groups almost impossible; Howard crushed the university budgets in 2005, which turned VCA into a "liability".

Through all of this the federal government refused to fund VCA as a separate institution like NIDA or AFTRS. Victorian state governments refused to provide direct funding, even though WAAPA in Western Australia is cited as a successful example.

Here is Steve's article:

Last week the deadline arrived for written submissions to the University of Melbourne's Review of the VCA – 'Defining the Future for the VCA and Music at the University of Melbourne'. According to the University's website, at the last count the number of submissions had reached 136 and was still climbing so there will be quite a bit of reading for chair Ziggy Switkowski and his review panel to do.

Mr Switkowski will be disappointed to see that many of the submissions call for a de-merger, an option included in the University's discussion paper but clearly not one that it wishes to dwell on.

When considering this Review and what its result might ultimately be, it's worth bearing in mind the words of VCAM's new Dean, Professor Sharman Pretty soon after she was brought in by the University to pull this new, rather larrikin and apparently undisciplined 'Faculty' into line. In an article in The Age newspaper on 21st May last year Robin Usher questioned Pretty about accusations by VCA staff and the NTEU that the heads of agreement governing the merger of VCA with the University had been 'trashed'. He reported that "Professor Pretty responded by pointing out that the VCA no longer existed"...

For me, still beaver away in the School of Film and TV after nearly 10 years of teaching there and thinking that things might change a bit but not too much, the penny finally dropped with a mighty clang. I felt like hanging a wreath on my office door. A deep sense of grief began to set in.

But the VCA's student cohort refused to concede. The very clients of the College, the consumers of all that it has offered for so long, voted with their feet and took to the streets. 'Sharman Pretty Fucked' was on the banner fellow staff and I followed up Bourke Street to the steps of parliament.

There was such a groundswell of community support for the VCA that I began to think that maybe common sense would prevail. Even Vice-Chancellor Glyn Davies seemed to come to the party and before we knew it he

had called a halt to 'change' while the Review took place.

But even as the moratorium was called and dates for introducing new curriculum etc. postponed, for those of us inside the organization it became apparent that changes were being pushed through by the new VCAM management regardless.

Those changes, largely concerned with administration and cost-cutting and seemingly completely impersonal in nature, are wreaking great pain and loss on VCA staff who were already reeling from Sharman's careless declaration of the death of one of Australia's greatest arts training institutions and the faint whiff of hope from Davies of resuscitation.

As a newly ex-staff member this policy of change by stealth doesn't fill me with optimism for the outcome of the Review. By the time Ziggy proclaims his remedy there may be nothing left to resuscitate. So for me the crucial question for the film and TV industry which we need to consider is this: if the unique (in Australia) teaching model developed and improved by the VCA Film and TV School over 40 years from its earliest days at Swinburne cannot continue to be delivered under the University of Melbourne amalgamation then who will deliver it? Because it must be delivered somewhere.

Of course I'm not claiming the VCA model is beyond improvement but when I began teaching documentary production at the Film and TV School in 1998 I slotted excitedly and with some awe into a teaching ethic based on the School's aim of training writer/directors by assisting each student to find and express their unique creative voice within their chosen medium of film.

In order to achieve this, every student was given the opportunity (nay, required) to write, direct and edit their own films as well as crew on classmates' productions. This was an approach (labelled by some as 'auteur') unique to the VCA and which remains so to this day. Every other institution in Australia teaching practical filmmaking either restricts students to making films in groups (ie. by committee), allows a director to direct but not write (or edit), or only selects some students' films for production. Nowhere does each and every directing student get to do what real directors do ie. take on as an individual the responsibility of creative control for a film from beginning to end, within a team set-up.

The emphasis at the VCA has always been as much on personal mentoring as formal teaching and students' time has been divided equally between classes and making films, with staff members morphing from 'teacher' to 'supervising producer' as required. This means that staff (who are also practitioners) have a strong interest in the success of their own students' films, which tend to reflect their influence just as films in the outside world reflect the influence of good EPs and producers.

Such an approach to 'training' (a forbidden word under the new VCAM regime because it smacks of 'TAFE') is of course very demanding on staffing and resources. Until now, Film and TV students have had around 4 full days (roughly 25 hours) per week of 'contact' over two 16-week semesters, either with their 'year' (or 'stream') lecturer or with sessional staff brought in to teach specialist craft and technical subjects. This is in complete contrast to the 12-week semesters and 8-12 hours per week contact which is the university norm these days but as has been said many times of late in the VCA's defence - artists need to practice, practice.....and practice.

A significant proportion of Film and TV students' time is spent in one-to-one or small group mentoring activities, essential if a student's individual creative voice is to be attended to. This means that year lecturers' time is pretty much fully committed to their students along with organising the course(s) they are responsible for (in my case I was the only full-time lecturer employed to teach documentary). It also means that not only do VCA lecturers get on first-name terms with their students but actually get to know them very well and often continue in that mentoring role long after graduation. As a practising documentary maker I have worked with and employed a number of students on my own projects after they graduated and some have employed me.

Correspondingly, in this kind of model, the filmmaking resources (ie. equipment, editing suites etc.) provided by the School have to be adequate to cope with the fact that during second semester every student is making their own film. Providing such resources and keeping them maintained and up to date is expensive but as a result in excess of 70 productions totalling the screen equivalent of around three feature films are currently produced through the VCA in a single year.

As the financial pressure has grown in recent years to take in more students to keep the Film and TV School viable, so the pressure on staff and facilities has also grown. Added to that, since amalgamation with the huge, centralised bureaucracy of the University, staff now spend more time on administrative tasks, ploughing through emails and shouting at their mute computers because they can't actually talk to anyone at HQ.

Moreover, teaching staff are now required to be 'academics', engaging in research and 'knowledge transfer' as well as upgrading their qualifications. Following the amalgamation for example, I began to receive regular emails from the University noting my lack of a PhD and asking me what I was doing about it. This, despite never once being asked by a student in 10 years whether I had a PhD or not. The students did however, always want to be reassured that I knew how to make a decent documentary film.

Of course, the response of management to the combined pressures I've described above is to call on staff to teach 'more cleverly' ie. less, in order to make time for all those other things. Ironically, such exhortations are usually followed up by yet another cut in the sessional teaching budget and the demand that permanent staff cover more of that stuff themselves! At the same time the Melbourne Model would see students' film related study time curtailed by the requirements of undertaking 'breadth' studies – an issue of some controversy within the University in general, never mind the Film and TV School.

It's not surprising then, that in this debate about pints and quart pots, management have already suggested (in the absence of any kind of serious curriculum review) that in future perhaps not all Film and TV students should get to make films and that anyway students could make less films during their studies.

When I began teaching documentary at the VCA in 1998 I had 7 Graduate Diploma students to take under my wing and shepherd through an intensive 1-year course designed to immerse them in the genre and skill them up for a future of making compelling docos as critical and aware members of the documentary community. They loved it and I loved it. I guess 'passion' was a key word. Nobody demanded any more of me and nobody suggested I was under employed.

By 2004 when the Film and TV curriculum was revised (for the better, I might say), I found I had two courses to run simultaneously (Masters and Grad Dip) and an average of around 10 doco students all up. Still nobody suggested I was under employed. Now the rule of thumb under the new regime appears to be 12 students per staff member (although they'd prefer 15). As a result, no doco courses are running in Film and TV this year due to 'a lack of suitable applicants'. Or, perhaps one should say (given that at post-grad level only about 4 Commonwealth Supported places are on offer in documentary), a lack of suitable applicants prepared to stump up (or borrow) \$23,000 for a full-fee place for a year of increasingly shortened semesters, less input and probably no budget to make their film with (traditionally VCA has provided a significant cash budget to assist students with their films but the amount provided has now dwindled to almost nothing).

Being as I have never had more than 10 'suitable' students in a year, one wonders if documentary will ever return to the VCA.

Hence my question.

My description of the VCA Film and TV course may well be a description of an 'elite' institution, especially in comparison to the sausage factory that large parts of the university sector has become under economic rationalism and the doctrine of 'user pays', but if that's so, as with our elite institutions in sport and other cultural and corporate endeavours, you get what you pay for. It has not been unusual for me to hear comments from students during my time at the VCA like: "I've learnt more here in 2 months than I learned doing film for 2 years at my previous university". If you want Olympic medals you have to invest heavily in the people that will win them. And if you want to win Oscars, ditto.

The real question then, given that the Government, through the tertiary education sector, won't pay, is who will?

Steve Thomas

Steve Thomas is a documentary maker whose credits include *Black Man's Houses*, *Least Said, Soonest Mended* and *Hope*. He taught the documentary course at the Victorian College of the Arts from 1998 to 2009.