



Thursday, 13 May 2010

## Ziggy's VCA Review fails to impress

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

Victorian College of the Arts activists have slammed a report into the organisation's future, describing the 16-page prescription as "impotent" because it fails to tackle the core concerns raised by staff and students.

The review, which was [officially released \(http://vcam.unimelb.edu.au/discussion/report-review.html\)](http://vcam.unimelb.edu.au/discussion/report-review.html) early this afternoon following the circulation yesterday of leaked drafts, was written by a committee headed by former Telstra chief Ziggy Switkowski in response to a contested discussion paper lodged last November.

The report acknowledges the severe funding shortfall besting the elite academy, but appears to contain little in the way of concrete initiatives or benchmarks. Industry representative Scott Dawkins, who has waged a relentless campaign to "save" the VCA on behalf of 13,000 supporters, said Switkowski has failed in his brief.

"The complete lack of any suggested benchmarks...renders the whole Review process worthless. This allows the University to continue to degrade VCAM without fear of reproach."

The controversial Melbourne Model – which students say has the potential to cruel practical courses in favour of more generalist "breadth" subjects – received cautious backing, with the suggestion that its suitability be re-examined as part of a another review. However, a verdict on the Model is now not expected until 2013.

The report recommends the old VCA and the Parkville-based School of Music remain merged, but that two separate divisions be established under special directors to preserve a semblance of autonomy. The VCA could be renamed "Melbourne Arts", among a number of alternatives, but the budgetary implications of the change are not explained in any depth.

The report also claims the VCA's musical theatre and puppetry offerings, which were axed last year as part of broader budget cuts, should be "re-evaluated." It confirms that the VCA is propped up each year by between \$6 million and \$20 million from the University's central administration, a result of funding changes pursued by former education minister Brendan Nelson in 2003.

The Switkowski committee was inundated with 371 submissions, many of which called for the VCA's autonomy to be preserved and its funding future guaranteed. It was designed to allay fears following the furore that erupted last year over changes to the institution that students said placed the VCA's practical focus under threat.

The University said this morning it will prepare its response to the report which will then be forwarded to the University's governing council for approval.

Vice Chancellor Glyn Davis said: "This has been important work for the University and the Faculty but also for quality arts education...This Report offers findings which will help inform the University and the Faculty in defining the future direction of the Faculty to serve the needs of its stakeholders."

The report also received the qualified backing of the National Tertiary Education Union Victorian secretary Matthew McGowan:

*"We have been saying for years that without additional government funding, the Victorian College of the Arts and Music will continue to suffer. The University of Melbourne review released today confirms that the future of high quality specialist teaching at the VCA will continue to be under threat.*

*"The review agrees with union concerns about the nature of many of the courses and structure of schools, including Music Theatre and Puppetry. University management and in particular VCAM Dean Sharman Pretty were premature in cancelling these important courses."*

But Save VCA's Dawkins told *Crikey* that the six month process involving six formal meetings and two day long consultations had achieved "nothing."

"The war of attrition continues. We have a 'nothing' review which will buy the University another 6 months as they consult about their consultation, by which time VCAM will be so far gone people will start to wonder what's left to save. It's a highly effective strategy by Vice Chancellor Glyn Davis which is aided by silence from Education Minister Julia Gillard, Arts Minister Peter Garrett and Victorian Arts Minister Peter Batchelor."

*Crikey* contacted Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard's office for comment this morning. A spokesperson said the Deputy PM would "carefully consider the report and respond in due course."

The VCA's future now rests in the hands of Davis, Pretty and former Melbourne Arts Festival svengali turned Deputy Dean Kristy Edmunds.

They will have to grapple with a number of contradictions in the report, that suggest hard financial data surrounding the institution is difficult to come by.

"Rent" charged by the University for 2009 is listed at \$4.9 million, whereas VCA finance expert Alan Tait, who personally addressed the committee during the six-month consultation process, previously priced it at \$6 million. Former federal Labor MP Race Mathews, in his joint submission to the review, described the rent figure as "morally unconscionable" because the University had inherited the VCA's prime real estate when it formally merged with the institution in 2007.

The report also erroneously claims that the axed musical theatre course was a victim of "financial analyses" when in fact it operated in the black and was among the college's cheapest offerings.



[\(http://ad.doubleclick.net/click;h=v8/3999/0/0/%2a/a:223086591;0-0;0:11688897;1314-600/40;36167392/36185275/1;::~~sscs=%3fhttp://www.crikey.com.au/emporium/bumper-stickers/\)](http://ad.doubleclick.net/click;h=v8/3999/0/0/%2a/a:223086591;0-0;0:11688897;1314-600/40;36167392/36185275/1;::~~sscs=%3fhttp://www.crikey.com.au/emporium/bumper-stickers/)

**crikey**