



Friday 21 May 2010

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By Email: staff@savevca.org

Professor Glyn Davis
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Re: VCAM Review Report & Moving Forward

Dear Glyn,

We write in response to the University of Melbourne's VCAM Review Report released to the public on May 13, 2010.

We welcome elements of the report, however the report leave many questions unanswered and significant concerns remain about the final decisions that may be made about the future of the Faculty.

Elements of the report that we believe are positive include;

- VCA should be a "national multidisciplinary elite arts training and education institution, based at Southbank, with funding from both the Federal and State governments".

The Report stops short of recommending what action to take in terms of attracting more funding (e.g. many submissions suggested the aggressive pursuit of Federal Arts Ministry funding as per the NIDA model) and what benchmarks should be used to measure the achievement of that objective.

- Specialisation in education is key for elite arts training (page 8).

Again, no benchmark is given as to what degree of specialisation is required. There is also no discussion of the University's guarantee to the Brumby Government of 75% specialisation under any VCAM Melbourne Model (and the fact the VCAM Music experience shows 75% specialisation does not mean 75% practical, studio-based training).

- Students demand “longer semesters, more contact hours, more rehearsal time, more testing (via performance and peer reviews) and extended campus hours”. Students also demand access to “great teachers, well designed curriculum with time to practise, a high quality peer group, access to and opportunities for good connections to the profession and industry [and] good facilities and equipment” (page 8).

Again, no minimum benchmarks are suggested and there is no mention of how the student experience has suffered to date.

- The VCAM student body should be “the most artistically talented young people in the community” (page 10).
- VCAM graduates should be “industry ready” (page 10).

There are no clear mechanisms proposed to address extensive industry concerns with VCAM and University Management and the Melbourne Model. Concern expressed in the public submissions about the removal of course offerings and reduction in sessional staff teaching hours is not referenced.

- VCAM teaches via “intensive studio-based and performance orientated learning” (page 11).

Importantly, acknowledgements are made in the Report indicating that Dr. Switkowski did listen to stakeholder concerns and the report makes it clear that;

- VCAM Management has been lax and it is clear some change processes were not carefully planned (page 4).
- Students are highly concerned “about unexplained changes at the VCAM – to courses, staff, administrative processes, and facilities while confronting increasing fees from accreditation – devalued by a diluted and demoralised VCAM experience” (page 9).

Again the reason for this poor communication and systematic Management failure is not addressed or recommendations made to redress this.

- It is noted that many VCAM students already have extensive education experience before coming to VCAM and thus the concept of the students requiring additional educational “breadth” is not necessary (page 9).

For the record, SAVE VCA has had concerns about the conduct of the review since it was announced. While we actively supported the notion of an independent review of VCAM’s finances and curriculum, as was thought to have been agreed to by yourself and the former Victorian Arts Ministers (The Age 09/09/09), the actual review was less than this.

In our view what was delivered was a University-led process that included a Discussion Paper that was internally focused, a public submission period that operated in the VCAM holidays, a Review Committee of which only two members were elected and which was heavily weighted towards University management and a Panel who had to be lobbied to make available even the simplest of Review processes (e.g. the student forums).

Despite these reservations, we participated in the review in good faith expecting that, at the very least, the consultation process would unearth useful statistical, financial and factual information. That the expert resources available to the Review would be able to provide a professional analysis of such information and that this in turn would help guide future developments for the VCAM. Unfortunately the Report does not present international benchmarks, financial analysis of the possible models or any detailed analysis of the 371 submissions received.

The report does not acknowledge that many changes have already taken place, and are continuing to be implemented, that act to undermine the recommendations. The proposal to move away from talent based entry in favour of ENTER scores is one example. Others include reduction in term length, and specific curriculum changes that appear driven by cost reduction strategies rather than educational imperatives. We understand there are further curriculum changes currently being considered that will further weaken the integrity of the courses even as the University considers its formal response to the report. None of these changes appear subject to consultation or review.

There is also no discussion of the effect that the loss of 8% of VCAM's staff in 2009 (page 12) has had on teaching hours and quality of student support and services.

This Review misses the opportunity to capitalise on the public interest in the former VCA to both thoroughly quantify and call for appropriate funding from Government in this pre-election period.

There remain many concerning aspects to the Report that show key issues raised in a majority of submissions were not heard or understood and were certainly not subject to any close scrutiny or analysis. Some of these include:

- Failing to give a recommendation regarding the Melbourne Model's application to VCAM, instead postponing any implementation to 2013 pending yet another Review. This course of action is not in the interest of either the University or VCAM as it leaves the Faculty in limbo, stretching out damage to the College's reputation and almost certainly diverting prospective students to study interstate.

The vast majority of the 371 public submissions to the Review deemed the Melbourne Model inappropriate for VCAM. Assertions that the VCA "School of Music appears to have adopted the breadth subject formula within the Melbourne Model with success" (page 9) is not referenced and is at odds with the feedback supplied during the Review student forums.

- The suggestions of demerger within a single Faculty (Conservatorium of Music and "Melbourne Arts") is uncosted and unreferenced. The specific reference to the inclusion of the Southbank Music Performance in a separate Music Conservatorium contradicts the Report's own endorsement of the importance of maintaining "multidisciplinary elite arts training" by separating music away from the other art forms.
- The Report presents financial figures that are not referenced and indeed contradict information supplied by the VCAM Dean and University finance staff. For instance the rental charged by the University of Melbourne to VCAM for use of its own property in 2009 is priced at \$4.9m (Report Page 12) whereas at a VCAM staff meeting on 15 September 2009, Alan Tait (Head of Finance at the University of Melbourne) priced this rental at \$6m. Similarly the Review Report suggests the 2010 budget rental cost is \$5.7m whereas VCAM's 2010 Business Plan suggests this figure is thought to have been \$9.6m.
- Critical financial information, including discussion of VCAM's finances pre and post merger, is not supplied even though it was supplied via public submissions and presumably made available to the Committee by the University. For instance, there is no analysis of why the subsidy figures move between \$6 and \$20 million per year (page 12) or why rent charged to VCA by the University is not offset by the significant real estate windfall the University enjoyed when it merged with VCA.

In their supplementary submission to the Review, Noel Turnbull, The Hon Dr. Race Mathews, Lynne Landy and Noel Denton suggested “*The UoM charging the VCA \$6 million a year rent for a site, gifted to it, worth \$230 million is morally unconscionable. If the rent is added (at constant current values) to the capital value above the UoM will have ended up with assets and transfers worth more than \$500 million over the next few decades in return for the \$5 million transfer imposed on it for a few years*”.

- The Report supplies erroneous information about the Music Theatre course that should be publicly retracted. The assertion that the suspension of Music Theatre was “logically informed by such financial analyses” (page 12) needs to be justified, given that the VCA Music Theatre degree program was fully costed, ran in the black and was the cheapest degree course to run at VCA.
- The significant concerns of staff and students with regard to the current VCAM Management team, as expressed in the public submissions, are not mentioned. The fact remains that the Dean does not hold the support of her staff and student body.
- Suggestions that there are advocates for VCAM Film & TV becoming a completely post graduate course (page 11) is not referenced and is more in line with the VCAM Dean’s stated concerns about the cost of teaching film and television courses rather than ideas raised in the public submissions or the student forums. Indeed such a recommendation is in stark contrast to reality, where even as we write, two directors with films in competition at the Cannes Film Festival are alumni of the VCA Film & TV undergraduate stream.

Overall, this report is largely unreferenced and has produced quasi recommendations unsupported by detailed reasoning or provision of critical evidence. It appears that the task of providing solutions has been left to further committees or to the stakeholders themselves.

This inefficiency has come at a time when VCAM should be capitalising on a two-election year to press both State and Federal Government to better VCAM’s financial situation, not only to protect the student experience, but also Victoria’s multimillion dollar arts business.

Notwithstanding these significant concerns, the report does give the University an opportunity to reconsider the direction that it is taking with the Faculty of the VCAM. In line with the earlier recommendations we have indicated support for, we seek your urgent intervention to prevent the continuing irremediable dismantling of the courses being offered. We further seek the following;

- That the University commits to join concerned stakeholders including Save VCA to lobby government to provide adequate funding to allow the reinstatement of a practice based educational model.
- A public commitment that the University will immediately:
 1. Place an indefinite hold on any application Melbourne Model beyond Music;
 2. Place an indefinite hold on any further changes to staff numbers, course offerings or course delivery;
 3. Return VCA Music streams from 2011.
 4. Return VCA Music Theatre and Puppetry for a 2011 intake.
 5. A 2010-2011 moratorium of VCAM being subject to Responsible Division Management costs including rental and administration charges, pending the above mentioned review.

We urge you to act decisively, and meet with SAVE VCA at a time convenient to you, so we can work quickly together for VCAM's future.

Kind Regards,

Ros Walker for SAVE VCA