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A Pretty solution to the politics of VCAM

26 Jul 10 by Julie Hare | [Print this story](#) | [Send this story to a friend](#)

Melbourne University last week released its response into a review of the Victorian College of the Arts and Music - but it still has to plug the \$6 million annual funding gap.

The upcoming federal and Victorian elections appear to have ignited urgent political interest in the Victorian College of the Arts and Music. Both Premier John Brumby and federal education minister Simon Crean indicated last week they are eager to help the financially ailing faculty of the University of Melbourne.

The university is located in the marginal federal seat of Melbourne - which is considered likely to be won by the Greens in the upcoming federal election.

The university has been hammered by negative publicity over VCAM. Although it merged the VCA and Conservatorium of Music in 2007, the issue became heated during 2009 following the appointment of a new dean Professor Sharman Pretty.

Last week, however, the Save the VCA lobby group was cautiously optimistic that its campaign had been successful after the university released its response to a high-level report into the troubled faculty - and Pretty resigned from her post.

Pretty became a deeply controversial figure as she attempted a massive overhaul of VCAM. Under her direction, the college was to have \$11 million a year cut from its budget. To apply the Melbourne Model, she was pushing the introduction of three-year undergraduate fine arts or music degrees, with another two years required for specialisation, with the focus moving from practical to academic. And she also wanted to reduce the VCA from six schools to three: dance, drama and production in a school of performing arts; arts, film and television in a second school, with the third to be a merger of the conservatorium with the university's school of music, creating the largest music faculty in Australia.

However, following widespread anger and negative publicity over the plans, the university commissioned former Telstra boss Ziggy Switkowski to conduct a review, which was handed to the university in May.

Last week the university responded, with the report's 11 recommendations all adopted.

Under the recommendations, VCAM will remain as a single faculty but comprise two discrete sections - the VCA and the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music. Each will be led by a director who in turn reports to a dean of the faculty.

The university has also committed to maintaining a high-contact, studio-based teaching model while delaying the introduction of the Melbourne Model, pending a curriculum review.

On the funding front, the university said it was imperative that the faculty devise a business model which addressed its annual \$6 million shortfall.

"Achieving budget certainty for schools will require plans for enhancing income through international student recruitment, new graduate fee-based courses, requests for additional government funding for outreach and complementary activities, continued cost review, provision of breadth study options, and advancements in curriculum sustainability models resulting from curriculum review."

It also said the faculty would need to look at increasing the number of domestic enrolments, optimise space usage and other "revenue diversification strategies".

"Additionally, new approaches to state and federal governments will be made to further enhance the faculty's

financial position.”

Serendipity, however, intervened with both Crean and Brumby jumping the gun by making public statements that their doors were open - as their cheque books were also likely to be.

“The VCA plays a significant role in our arts industry and our government is keen to ensure that a high-level of studio-based training is maintained and enhanced in the future,” Brumby told an arts-loving audience gathered at the Melbourne International Film Festival.

“We are having constructive conversations with the commonwealth on the future of the VCA - and I am determined to deliver a solution for a sustainable, vibrant and appropriately resourced VCA in the future.”

Brumby’s comments represented an about-face on the state government’s position. Only a few weeks ago, arts minister Peter Batchelor reiterated - as he had done many times in the past - that higher education funding was a federal responsibility - and there was nothing the state government could do about it. Opposition leader Ted Baillieu had as early as September last year picked it as an election issue - offering \$6 million in recurrent funding if elected Premier.

Crean’s interest in the VCAM also appears to have been motivated by voting patterns in the inner city seat.

A statement released last week said that, following representations by Labor candidate for Melbourne Cath Bowtell, Crean would look into how the federal government “constructively engage with the issues raised in the university’s response”.

“I look forward to hearing [Bowtell’s] advice on the best way the federal government can ensure that the important contribution of the VCA to the creative arts is maintained and strengthened,” Crean said.

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