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Federal funds sweet music for troubled arts college

SUPPORTERS of the Victorian College of the Arts and Music have been urged to maintain pressure on the University of Melbourne to ensure \$5.1 million in promised federal funding would not be "siphoned off" for rent and administration.

On Sunday, federal ALP candidate for the seat of Melbourne Cath Bowtell announced a re-elected Labor government would contribute \$5.1 million, indexed annually from 2012.

The federal government funding would be bolstered by a one-off \$3 million grant from a re-elected state Labor government. Of this, \$2 million would be used as "seed funding" for a foundation trust. Federal Labor would match the \$2 million seed funding pledge.

The announcement came as a welcome surprise to campaigners, with the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations advising staff a week ago not to expect any pre-election funding announcement.

School of Film and Television senior lecturer David Price recently wrote to Education Minister Simon Crean to express concern about the funding shortfall the university faces. A recent review of the institution found it has an operating deficit of about \$6 million a year, but the shortfall was closer to \$20 million a year "on a fully costed basis".

Last Wednesday the department wrote to Mr Price on behalf of Mr Crean. "As a federal election has recently been announced, the Australian government has assumed a 'caretaker role' ... Accordingly, while the matters that you have raised have been noted, it is not appropriate to provide a more substantive response at this time. I invite you to raise the issue with the incoming government."

The funding pledge would restore funding stripped under the Howard government, which forced VCAM to merge with University of Melbourne in 2007.

The funding is conditional on University of Melbourne maintaining its contribution of \$6 million a year. Save VCA spokesman Scott Dawson said given VCAM's funding shortfall was up to \$20 million, Labor's funding commitment would "seal the gap" but would go further if VCAM demerged from the University of Melbourne.

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