

The Australian

Higher Education

Campaign succeeds, but messy fight leaves fallout

- by: Andrew Trounson
- From: The Australian
- September 14, 2011 12:00AM



Professor Barry Conyngham is the dean of Melbourne University's Victorian College of Arts and Music. Picture: Aaron Francis

Source: The Australian

THE Victorian College of the Arts and its brand of studio training has been preserved and even enhanced by government funding boosts, but fallout from the bitter fight that attracted the funding largesse in the first place is still being worked through.

New dean Barry Conyngham says enrolments were just shy of target this year, and attributes the dip in demand to "instability" over last year's proposed budget cuts and curriculum changes.

But Conyngham, a classical composer and former vice-chancellor of Southern Cross University who was appointed dean in February to heal the rifts, is realistic enough to know that it will take more than six months to settle the rocking boat.

But with the new funding and a new curriculum, which preserves studio-based teaching, Conyngham is keen to talk about the future rather than dwell too much on the past.

"My message now is that not only do we have a VCA of the kind we had before, but we have the opportunity to

make it better," Conyngham says.

In a recent essay on the VCA for Currency House, playwright and former head of drama at the college, Richard Murphet, argues that parent institution, the University of Melbourne, has to recognise the different nature of "the beast with which it is attempting, somewhat reluctantly, to mate".

"It needs to be cut a lot of slack, trusted to develop on its own terms, given licence to plan its curricula in accordance with its own culture, and allowed to take greater control of the administration of its own activities," Murphet wrote.

When put to Conyngham, he says this is happening. The most obvious manifestation of that is the curriculum. At the centre of last year's dispute were Melbourne's plans to introduce its model of broad undergraduate study into the VCA: it was feared this would dilute the intensive studio training craved by students. Those plans are now "off the table", Conyngham says.

Under its new curriculum, the VCA is offering a bachelor of fine arts in seven specialties, such as dance or theatre. Students will be expected to take critical studies subjects in their own discipline.

Unlike the Melbourne model there is no requirement to take courses outside their specialty, but students will have the option to do so, including taking practical courses in collaboration with other specialties, such as film matched with contemporary music.

And the VCA's relative independence is underscored by dedicated government money. It was the VCA's singular good fortune that its funding crisis and fight with the university coincided with looming state and federal elections last year.

The SaveVCA campaign, which culminated in a colourful mass protest in Melbourne, helped convince the politicians that it was a vote winner. The Gillard government duly stumped up \$5 million a year for the VCA conditional on the university continuing its \$5m a year subsidy to the faculty. The Brumby state government put up \$3m, while the new Liberal-National Baillieu government that succeed Brumby is providing \$24m over four years for infrastructure, equipment and special initiatives such as scholarships.

But Conyngham stresses that while the VCA has significant independence it still has obligations to the university. "We can't have it all our own way," he says. "The faculty has to contribute to the running of the university."

It is the size of these obligations, in the form of administrative charges and rent that were a big part of last year's disputes. And they continue to bubble.

Conyngham has been able to negotiate a reduction in the annual rent the university charges of about \$800,000 from next year. For some it's proof the VCA was being overcharged.

But Conyngham says the VCA's attachment to the Melbourne University brings international stature to their degrees.

Concerns about overheads and rent, which includes payments to cover future maintenance, ignore the fact that before integration with the university, the VCA had been forced to let its infrastructure run down.

Conyngham brings a crucial combination of authority and groundedness to leading the VCA. It further helps that director Su Baker is popular and has an 11-year history at the institution.

Conyngham took over from the ill-fated Sharman Pretty, a former dean of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Pretty was given a tough job to make the faculty financially sustainable while introducing the Melbourne model in the face of staff unease. In the end the job she faced, and arguably the way she went about it, brought about her fall from grace when the university had an about-face on introducing the Melbourne model. "Someone had to be made

to wear the mask of Darth Vader," wrote Murphet. "If Professor Pretty had not happened along, we would have had to invent her."

Conyngham arrived after the battles had been fought and won.

"I felt that the solutions that came out of the review, the assurances that came from the university, and the commitment that came from the staff, meant that one could start to reassert the traditions of the VCA, which were the things that people wanted to fight for," he said.

He also has no axe to grind with the SaveVCA campaigners, and acknowledged it was the key to securing extra funding.

Both he and Professor Baker were at the launch of Murphet's VCA essay in July.

And while Conyngham says the dispute was marked by high emotion and sometimes confusion, "you can't argue with the fact that they changed the institution, and they should be thanked for that".

SaveVCA isn't going away. While campaigner and film producer Ros Walker agrees the changes have been "terrific," there is still a need for a watchdog.

"There is a role to keep an eye on what's happening, to support changes that are good and rally support when it is needed," Walker says.

And Conyngham is happy for their staying around.

"I like a bit of scepticism, so I think it is terrific that they are there and if they have issues that bite then we should be able to respond to them," he said.

"Having someone who cares enough to keep an eye on you isn't a bad thing at all."

Perhaps every university faculty needs its own SaveVCA campaign.