

## Victorian College of the Arts

### Follow up Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts August, 2003

Set out below are issues of concern for the VCA associated with the announced package of reforms by the Federal Government to the Higher Education Sector. The VCA would be seriously financially disadvantaged if the reforms are imposed unamended, and its ability to remain functionally viable would be seriously compromised. It was felt that the Committee should be appraised of this situation and that this information complement the VCA's previous submission.

The VCA has its own Act of Parliament and is affiliated with the University of Melbourne. It is Australia's only separate multi disciplinary arts training and education institution. The training offered to talented students has a context and breadth that is different to that offered by single discipline institutions. The Western Australian Academy of the Performing Arts and the Queensland University of Technology Academy of Performing Arts have now been absorbed into their University's Faculties of Creative Industries.

In the late 90's the then Premier of Victoria advocated to the Prime Minister the transfer of the funding responsibility of the VCA from DETYA (DEST) to DCITA. He was advised that precedent and its consequences posed a problem for the Federal government. As the VCA remains as Australia's only separate multi disciplinary arts training and education institution - the issue of precedent dissolves. Perhaps it is timely to reconsider the benefits of the VCA transferring to DCITA and having its funding delivered through that framework. This would mean that the VCA would not be bound by complex formulas that apply to Equivalent Full Time Students (EFTSU's), but rather could negotiate a funding arrangement that related to the real costs associated with training emerging artists. As with NIDA, AFTRS and NICA the VCA would retain its relationship with a major University (the University of Melbourne) for academic accreditation and quality assurance matters.

Set out below are the VCA's major concerns in relation to the proposed Nelson Reform package:

#### The level playing field approach to course costs

The proposed course contribution schedule determines the allocation for the visual and performing arts (Cluster 7) at \$9,091 per student inclusive of capital roll in. This figure is significantly below the VCA's current EFTSU. The DEST allocation for the VCA was preserved at the pre University of Melbourne affiliation rate. In addition in late 1999 DETYA (DEST) negotiated an arrangement with the VCA to reduce its student load by 20% over 3 years, while retaining the same levels of recurrent funding. This was approved specifically for the VCA to provide the flexibility required to maintain its intensive training. The revised base amount per EFTSU is currently \$19,028.90. This is inclusive of capital roll in. At the newly proposed rate, the VCA would be losing around \$10,000 or 52.23% per EFTSU.

If the Federal government were to cut the VCA's recurrent grant by 52.23% it would be fatal for the VCA, and disastrous for the nation's artistic and cultural life. The VCA is currently seeking an exemption from the recommended national loading for visual and performing arts courses.

If the schedule were applied to DCITA funded organisations, they would be similarly affected. The Federal government through DCITA has acknowledged that it costs approximately \$24,000 per student to train in drama and production (NIDA) and approximately \$125,000 to train a film student at the AFTRS.

### **Parity and Equity of Funding**

The issue of the lack of parity and equity of funding with the Sydney based NIDA and AFTRS is ongoing, but becomes even more acute when the revised funding levels are compared. The VCA is renowned nationally and internationally as a first class multi-disciplinary arts training and education institution. The demand/supply ratio for our talent based entry is as competitive as NIDA and the AFTRS, the student cohort as nationally distributed as NIDA and AFTRS, the courses as intensive and as experiential, and the graduate performance equals those from NIDA and AFTRS. In the last few months alone, two VCA film graduates have won the Palme D'Or at Cannes for documentary (Glendyn Ivin) and the equivalent for animation at the Annercey international animation festival (Adam Elliott). Art School graduate, Patricia Piccinini has also taken the world by storm representing Australia at the Venice Biennale. She is the 8th VCA graduate/staff member to represent Australia at the last ten Venice Biennales - an event that is described as the "greatest accolade for a living artist".

### **Five-year entitlement**

25% - 30% of VCA undergraduate students (drama, film and television, art, production and improvisation music) come to the VCA with a previous undergraduate degree or partial degree. The highly competitive nature of the talent based entry system (eg. 24 places offered out of 1200 auditioning for drama - 3.3%) means that students are more successful with life experience behind them. The age profile is not unlike the students of NIDA and the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS).

Talent is distributed across the socio-economic spectrum and many of our most successful artists have endured early hardships to achieve their goals. Only classical music and ballet require early parental support as training begins in childhood, and they are courses most likely to attract school leavers. Life as an artist does not provide significant financial rewards, certainly not in the first few years of practice. The capacity of students to repay loans for fees is sorely reduced. Double degrees cannot be entered into upfront as the nature of the training is talent related, intense and experiential. Sequential degrees do take place but a student cannot enrol upfront in a double degree program as talent is assessed annually and entry cannot be guaranteed years in advance.

The five-year learning entitlement will negatively impact on the high quality of the student cohort.

One solution is to request an extension of the learning entitlement to seven or eight years for intensive arts training institutions.

### **Performance Measurements**

The measurements and benchmarks that will be used to assess the value and effectiveness of our institutions are the Graduate Destination Survey and the Course Experience Questionnaire, administered by the Graduate Careers Council. Both these surveys are absolutely inadequate for graduate artists. If the surveys were applied to the DCITA arts training institutions, their results would be on a par with VCA results. The surveys do not measure the aspirational factor, nor the commitment and time it takes to achieve success as an artist. Graduates may have an unrelated day job but continue to audition, make films or exhibit. Artists have a portfolio career - which cannot be measured by a survey which prescribes success in terms of where they are employed and how much they earn. An alternative instrument and longitudinal studies are required to better assess the effectiveness of arts training institutions. Such a project is the subject of a submission to DCITA for funding (an international research project led by the Director of the VCA with the support of the University of Melbourne's Centre for Higher Education).

## **The student loan schemes and enhanced HECS debts**

Training artists is expensive. The hours are long and intensive and students part-time work capacity is reduced. In acknowledgement of this AFTRS pays its students an allowance. Artists graduate into initial certain penury and take some years to establish their careers. Nevertheless their contribution to the social, cultural and economic life of Australia is profound. With the introduction of new fees, talented people may not choose the artists path, because the size of the debt will prohibit other life goals - eg. home mortgage, kids, etc.

Australian artists travel and are renowned throughout the world as well-trained, lateral thinkers, excellent ensemble members, with a great capacity for hard work and humour. We want our artists to travel but we also want them to come home and nurture and nourish Australia's cultural life. An overwhelming debt may result in our artist graduates leaving Australia permanently to escape the debt.

## **Increased payment threshold**

The proposed increase to a \$30,000 threshold before graduates begin to repay their HECS debt is welcomed, but increasing it to \$35,000 would be even better for artists - who as self employed creatives meet their professional expenses from their own income.

## **Action**

It may be timely and opportune to secure a sustainable future for the VCA. As Australia's pre-eminent multi-disciplinary arts training and education institution, it has been chronically under resourced. The stellar international and national performances of the VCA graduates attests to the excellence of the training. The Federal government and State government have contributed \$10m each to a significant capital upgrade. Also \$3.2m has recently been secured by a philanthropic organization to deliver a cultural transformation regarding indigenous students and artists participation in the College. In addition to its flagship award courses the VCA is now delivering a raft of non-award community access programs to thousands of children and adults. It is a vigorous robust institution, drawing on the cultural strengths of Melbourne and nurturing the cultural life of this nation and its international representation. It must be supported adequately to continue.

The VCA is currently advocating these issues to the Ministers for the Arts and Education, Science & Training and seeks the support of the Committee in relation to the information as outlined above.

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