No applause for Swinburne’s curtain call

By BENJAMIN PREISS
HIGHER EDUCATION REPORTER

IT HAS been an education centre for more than 150 years, producing students who have taken on prominent roles in theatre and the creative arts. But the final curtain is drawing near.

Swinburne University is planning to leave the Prahran campus that includes the David Williamson Theatre, rehearsal rooms, television production equipment and a training restaurant.

Courses such as the popular diploma of theatre arts face an uncertain future after the state government withdrew almost $300 million in TAFE funding.

Swinburne’s theatre diploma, taught at Prahran, is considered one of the only courses in Australia teaching a combination of skills including stage design, performance and scriptwriting.

Playwright David Williamson said the theatre course should be one of the last on the “chopping block”. He said it had a strong reputation and gave students skills to work in the industry.

“In every major civilisation, creativity and the arts has corresponded with commerce,” Williamson said.

The university has committed to offering television and theatre courses in Prahran until at least 2013. Earlier this month the university revealed plans to close its Lilydale campus and stop teaching a list of courses, including hospitality, cookery and tourism.

Theatre and television studies did not appear on the list but the government is expected to slash funding for these courses, which is likely to increase fees substantially.

TAFE teachers are concerned that students may choose not to study if they are required to pay inflated fees for courses that have lost government subsidies.

The university has said it will stop offering TAFE courses with low student demand. Some courses will be moved to other campuses.

But theatre graduate and casual teacher Rosalind Mackay said other campuses lacked the equipment and theatres available to students in Prahran.

“It’s very frustrating,” she said. “I just think it’s going to be a great loss to the industry.”

Ms Mackay graduated in the 1990s and set up youth theatre company Knockabout Theatre in 2000.

“I went into the course wanting to learn acting but I also learnt amazing things like stage managing and lighting.”

A government spokesman said it was up to the university to decide whether it would continue offering courses at Prahran.

He said the university would need the government’s approval before it could sell the campus.

Red Stitch Actors Theatre company manager Rohan Shearn said the campus had produced many students who had gone on to work in the theatre industry.

Mr Shearn graduated with a diploma in small company and community theatre in 1995. “It gave me a very good grounding and basically set me up with enough skills to work in the industry,” he said.

Swinburne graduate and Knockabout youth theatre founder Rosalind Mackay says the Prahran campus closure will be a great loss to the industry.
Talks on tradies scheme start

Consultation on a national licensing scheme for electrical workers starts today. The scheme aims to enable tradespeople to work across state and territory borders. The reforms have been long sought to address skills shortages and come after the Council of Australian Governments announced plans to introduce a national licensing system in 2009. Federal Skills Minister Chris Evans said electrical workers would need only one licence to work across the country and the scheme would save $22 million a year, growing to $120 million after 10 years.

Marianna Papadakis
Regulators under fire on low standards

Joanna Mather

The integrity of the nation's vocational educational and training system remains at risk while Victoria and Western Australia refuse to join the national regulator, TAFE executives have told a standards review.

In a submission to the review by the National Skills Standards Council, TAFE directors called for a thorough vetting of the skills sector and a consistent national approach to the policing of provider quality. Such an approach is critical for addressing skills shortages but is unlikely to occur while Victoria and WA remain outside the Australian Skills and Quality Authority.

Blaming regulators for the dodgy colleges furore that led to the international student downturn and the Victorian state budget blowout, TAFE Directors Australia chief executive Martin Riordan said it was easier to become a registered training organisation in Australia than "to set up Jim's lawn mowing franchise".

He said current standards governing the sector were "unacceptably vague at best, which is evidenced by continued breaches of standards and colleges being allowed to trade irrespective of concerns on quality".

The Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment has asked the National Skills Standards Council, chaired by former Labor MP John Dawkins, to review regulator standards.

The standards include benchmarks for initial registration of providers as well as quality indicators for training packages and accredited courses.

The review will also consider how the regulators operate and make recommendations for changes to go to state and federal education and training ministers later this year. New standards will be in place from 2014.

"Failure to regulate VET standards effectively was one of the key contributors to the demise of the international student market," the TAFE directors say.

"Australia's reputation will not be restored unless and until it is clear that standards are rigorous and that they are being enforced. Access to government funding has been provided to [registered training organisations] ahead of regulation being effectively tightened, enabling the unscrupulous practices which were evident in the international market to continue in the domestic market."

State and federal governments have progressively allowed private providers to enter the vocational education and training sector, which has led the TAFE system to lose some of its market share.

In Victoria the government introduced a voucher-style system allowing students to "spend" their government entitlement at whichever provider they chose.

This led to a proliferation of new providers and enrolments in courses such as personal fitness and basic business shot up, resulting in a $500 million budget over-run.

Although Victoria and WA have not joined the national regulator, they adhere to standards applied by the authority. The two states argue that the best way to ensure that the needs of the states, employers and students are met is to maintain regulatory control.

The federal government has assumed responsibility for regulating providers who teach international students.

A row between the federal and state governments escalated last week, with Federal Skills Minister Chris Evans telling the Victorian government to sign up to the national regulator to eliminate low-quality training operators.

His Victorian counterpart, Peter Hall fired back, rejecting claims that the government has been slow to move on sub-standard providers.

The state's regulator, the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority, also defended its track record on policing the vocational sector after criticism that it had failed to uphold standards, as a wave of new providers set up to benefit from state government training subsidies.

A report for the National Skills Standards Council posted on the regulator's website outlined its 2011 compliance activity.

It says cancellations for almost 100 registered training organisations took place in 2011.

Whilst the majority were voluntary, 18 providers were shut down for serious non-compliance, eight registrations were cancelled for non-payment of fees and another six went bankrupt.

In a letter to The Australian Financial Review, Stuart Hamilton, who chairs the regulator, claimed the regulatory regime in Victoria was "the most rigorous of any state or territory in Australia".

He said the introduction of financial assessments of new providers last year resulted in 29 per cent of all new applications being rejected, while 14 per cent of existing providers had their registration cancelled for not meeting financial benchmarks.

The dodgy training colleges furore has
led to a downturn in overseas students.

**KEY POINTS**

- A proliferation of new training providers led to low-quality courses and a budget overrun in Victoria.
- A national approach with a thorough vetting of vocational institutions is needed to ensure skill standards are upheld, say TAFE directors.
Monash first to move into China

Joanna Mather

Monash University has cemented a deal which makes it the first Australian university licensed to operate in China.

In partnership with Southeast University, Monash will offer science and engineering master's degrees to an initial cohort of 2000 mainland Chinese at a new campus near Shanghai.

Visiting Australia to officially sign the agreement last week, Southeast University president Yi Hong praised Monash's research credentials and global reach.

"Especially the internationalisation of Monash University, in my personal opinion, is the best in all the Australian universities and also one of the best across the globe," he told The Australian Financial Review.

Monash announced the venture in April following approval from the Chinese Education Ministry for a graduate school, which will be jointly operated with Southeast.

The purpose-built school is located adjacent to Southeast's campus at Suzhou Industrial Park, a research and technology hub developed by the Chinese and Singapore governments.

Monash vice-chancellor Ed Byrne said a fifth of the world's Fortune 500 companies had a presence in the park, making it "possibly the most exciting innovation campus in the world today".

"When you stand there for the first time, the amount of investment and activity is almost unbelievable," he said.

"You are standing in the middle of what it must have felt like to be in Silicon valley in the '70s." The graduate school extends Monash's global footprint.

Outside Australia, the university has campuses in Malaysia and South Africa.

It also collaborates with the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay and earlier this year signed an agreement with Warwick University in the United Kingdom to offer joint degrees and exchange programs aimed at "preparing graduates for a globalised labour market".

Professor Byrne said Monash's international partnerships would help it climb global university rankings.

"Monash is advancing steadily and will end up well in the top 50 universities in the world," he said.

"Our major strategic accelerators are our close partnership with Southeast University and the new joint campus in China, a smaller but still significant collaboration in India with IIBT in Mumbai, and our strategic collaboration with Warwick University in the UK."

"Universities around the world are eyeing the opportunities presented by China's massive investment in higher education and research."

As the Financial Review reported this year, Beijing rejected applications from 10 Australian universities to teach degree courses in China last year.

It is excluding partnership proposals that do not fall in line with priority areas for national development.

In 2011, the Chinese Education Ministry blocked 25 applications by Australian universities to teach courses in conjunction with a Chinese partner, the highest number of rejections for any country. Monash's latest deal has therefore been warmly welcomed.

"This is the culmination of a great deal of effort and I believe the most ambitious single project that Monash University has been involved in for many, many years," Professor Byrne said.

"I think it's got the most amazing potential and just having the first licence of this type issued by the Chinese government puts us in a very strong position."

Southeast is one of the oldest higher education institutions in China, and one of a handful directly administered by the national education ministry. As such, the facilities at Suzhou are being financed by the Chinese government.

Professor Byrne said the partnership with Southeast did not involve any undergraduate teaching and Monash had no plans to establish any other large undergraduate campuses overseas.

Monash's internationalisation strategy had moved well beyond simply recruiting students to Melbourne, he said.

"The major countries that we're going to be dealing with in the years ahead are China and India. But China in particular, and our interaction with China needs to be at a deep intellectual level through postgraduate education and training, joint development of intellectual property and industry links," Professor Byrne said.

"They are the types of collaboration that will build the bridges culturally, politically and financially and ensure success between our two countries."

The graduate school will accept 350 master's students and 150 PhD candidates a year, building to 2000 over the next few years.

Initially, the campus will cater for mainland Chinese but it is likely to open up to students of other nationalities in the future.
The offshoring of jobs is nothing new. But the offshoring of highly skilled jobs is a stark new reality for Western workforces, an American-based skills expert told a conference in Adelaide last week.

David Finegold, from the school of management and labour relations at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, said millions of extra graduates in India and China meant employers in the West could access professional labour at a fraction of the cost.

"The numbers are staggering," he said. "In China in the last 20 years they've gone from having 600,000 graduates each year to now over 7 million.

"We haven't seen anything like that before. In India there are similar kinds of rapid expansion."

Professor Finegold, the senior vice-president for lifelong learning and strategic growth at Rutgers, said China and India would account for 35 per cent of the global workforce in coming decades.

That meant massive demand for higher education and vocational training, and opportunities for such providers from the US and Australia. But there were challenges, too.

"For example, in the US we have had a decline in law school applicants of about a third this year," Professor Finegold said.

"And the reason for that is so many firms are able to hire lawyers for a tenth or a fifth of what they would be paid in the US to do a lot of that back office work."

Professor Finegold was a keynote speaker at a conference jointly hosted by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research and TAFE South Australia.

In the US, he has been involved in trying to create a joint campus with a Chinese university for 10,000 students.

For families who could afford it, an education from a university abroad would continue to be attractive, he said. But there was sizeable onshore demand as well.

"You've got several hundred million people in the rising middle class in both countries that can afford to send their kids to Australia or the US," Professor Finegold said.

“But then you've got another few hundred million who can't quite afford that but who, if it was available at a lower cost closer to home, will make a significant investment there.”
UNIVERSITY students owe the federal government more than $23 billion — the biggest loans debt in history.

Taxation data compiled for The Daily Telegraph shows the average student racks up $14,400 in debt to pay for university tuition. However, students who study medicine and law run up much higher fees.

Students now owe a total of $23.1 billion through the higher education loan program (HELP), with $5.2 billion listed as “doubtful debt.”

Current HELP data shows that 1,567,100 students held an outstanding balance as at June 30, 2011, an increase of more than 100,000 on the year before. About one-third of those loans were held by students from NSW.

The number of students taking university loans has steadily increased since 2002, when there were 1,076,467 debtors.

Again, about one-third of those were students from NSW.

The total debt will dramatically increase this year following an increase in the number of students entering Australian universities.

While there is no real interest rate applied to the loans, the debts are indexed to reflect inflation and must be paid back when a student’s earnings reach $49,095 a year.

A Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education spokesman said: “The higher education loan program is internationally recognised as one of the best systems in the world with many countries attempting to copy it.”

The Gillard government has this year removed caps on the number of government-funded places universities can offer as part of a policy to increase the number of young people with a bachelor’s degree.

It has also abolished the student learning entitlement, which limited a person’s eligibility to study at university as a government-funded student to seven years full-time study.

More than 221,765 course offers were made to students this year, an increase of 5.5 per cent compared with 2011.

A report compiled by the Australian Centre for Educational Research has expressed concern about rapid expansion of university courses and maintaining quality.

University of Technology Sydney student Kira Duroux, 23, said she will have a debt of $18,000 after completing her bachelor of arts in public communication degree this year.

She said it was not possible to earn a decent wage without a bachelor’s degree so it was necessary for students to go into debt to pay for tuition.

She will likely go on to study a masters in secondary education after a few years in the workforce, bringing her total HELP debt to about $40,000.

She said this was not a concern because “it’s something that will only be paid off when I’m comfortable.”

BY THE NUMBERS

Number of university students with a HELP debt in NSW

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Outstanding Balance</th>
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Source: Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education
Sharing their music vibes to open opportunities

A program encouraging less-advantaged students to consider options for tertiary education has hit the right note, reports Kim Arlington.

They’re the kind of jam sessions that could open up new worlds of opportunity for school students. As part of a pilot program set to continue next year, future music teachers studying at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music visited schools in less-advantaged areas, improvising with students during weekly music workshops and encouraging them to consider different pathways to further study.

The schools – Bexley Public, Marrickville West Primary and Kogarah High participate in the Compass program, established at the University of Sydney to encourage school students into higher education.

In 2009, the federal government set the goal of attracting students from low socio-economic backgrounds to university, with current figures just shy of the target of 20 per cent of enrolments.

The Con is a faculty of the University of Sydney, which funded the music program through its Widening Participation Grants.

“Universities are opening up to a variety of people that would not traditionally choose tertiary study,” says Dr Jennifer Rowley, a senior lecturer in music education at the Con. “We all know that the more creative opportunities we offer our students, the more opportunity [there is] for increased learning. Unless we get into primary schools and start providing those opportunities … [we won’t] give the students a chance to find out where their talents and interests lie.”

The chair of the music education unit at the Con, Dr James Renwick, hopes the workshops allow pupils to see that music can open doors.

“There are some gorgeous bright sparks in these schools, and if it’s just one little experience that shows them some other options, it’s worth it.”

The principal of Bexley Public, John Daniels, says the program lifts the students’ aspirations in terms of striving for education. “We don’t send many kids on to university from our school. [Having students visit from] the Conservatorium, even though it’s a pretty elite institution, gives our students another aspect to their aspirations, beyond the academic side at university.”

The school workshops, which culminated in a concert at the Con featuring 43 children, will become part of the music education degree, promoting social equity and giving the student teachers practical experience.

Annabelle Osborne was among the 20 first-year Con students who jammed with the schoolchildren, “To see people who are planning on making a career out of music has been really inspiring for the group,” she says.

Fellow student Lyndon Abbott says the idea was to let the children “experiment with different instruments and discover a musical world”.

Annabelle Osborne, right, at work. Photo: Lee Besford