

THE STAGE

ArtsEd principal resigns after damning report into school's 'sexualised environment'

[NEWS](#) OCT 22, 2021 BY [MATTHEW HEMLEY](#)



Chris Hocking. Photo: Robin Savage

ArtsEd principal Chris Hocking has resigned following an external investigation into allegations of serious misconduct at the drama school, which the board has acknowledged were the result of “a misguided culture” made worse by a “failure in leadership”.

The resulting report, a summary of which has been published by the school's board, found there was an “overly sexualised environment” in the school of

musical theatre at ArtsEd, and that some staff had inappropriate relationships with students, breaching the school's policies.

According to the board, the investigation – led independently by Rebecca Tuck QC – looked into allegations of serious historic misconduct against current and former staff members. Affected students were 18 or over and the incidents investigated mostly occurred during the period between 2012 and 2017 in the school of musical theatre.

At that time, the school of musical theatre was led by Hocking. He has now decided to leave his position as principal of ArtsEd, a role he took up in 2017.

“It is now clear to the board that a change in leadership is required if we are to demonstrate how serious we are about transforming our culture. It is for that reason that our principal, Chris Hocking, has concluded that it is in the best interests of the school for a new principal to lead that effort,” chair of the board Mark Burch said.

In a statement, Hocking said: “I have, after 23 years at ArtsEd, stood down from my position as principal with effect from today. I wish ArtsEd all success in the future.”

According to the board, the investigation found:

- Areas where the “behaviour of individual staff members, freelancers and visiting creatives fell far below the high standards” demanded at the school.
- In the school of musical theatre, there was an “overly sexualised environment” within a number of music and dance classes. “Terms such as ‘sexy dance’, ‘wear what you dare’ and ‘naked bond’ were notorious and clearly distressed some students,” the board’s summary states.

- Some staff members exercised poor judgement in their relationships with higher education-level students. There are examples in the report of inappropriate relationships between staff members and HE students, in breach of the school's policies and code of conduct. "They should never have happened," Burch said.
- Some staff members showed a lack of regard for the physical and mental well-being of HE students and failed in their duty of care towards them.
- There were inconsistencies in how allegations of misconduct were handled by the school's leadership, with the result that some staff misconduct was not addressed correctly.
- In some instances, policies and procedures had not been applied universally by senior leadership, in spite of being updated regularly, including most recently in February 2021.
- There was a lack of communication with and support for the students who were affected.

Burch said the board accepted in full the conclusions within the report and "is resolved to put matters right".

"The conclusions reached by Rebecca are absolutely clear and we do not intend to soften or equivocate what is in the report. Naturally, it will take all of us some time to digest the full findings and to determine and fully implement every course of action that we need to take," he said.

He added: "It is clear from reading the authoritative conclusions that some of the events that took place within the school of musical theatre were wrong and the result of a misguided culture, which was made worse by a failure in leadership."

Burch said that what happened at the school "should never have happened."

“Some staff members acted wrongly. The board of trustees is ultimately responsible for the conduct of the staff, freelancers and visiting creatives, and on behalf of ArtsEd, I am deeply sorry,” he added, as he thanked the people who came forward to tell their stories.

“I hope they agree that Rebecca treated their concerns and complaints with the utmost seriousness,” he said.

As a result of the report, the board has announced a series of new measures to be taken by the school. These include:

- A special panel to conduct a review of the school’s existing policies and procedures to ensure they are in line with industry best practice. Once finalised, new and updated policies and procedures will be incorporated into ongoing training programmes across the entire HE institution.
- This panel will also review all employment contracts in the HE institution to ensure that they are clearly linked to the updated policies and procedures. This will include contracts for visiting staff and creatives.
- A second panel will instruct an external governance consultant to complete a review of governance practices and processes. The review will also cover whistle-blowing and complaint procedures.
- A review of well-being provision, which will look at the existing provision and identify gaps, make relevant recommendations for future provision.
- Rolling out consent and intimacy training – [already being provided in the school of acting](#) – to the school of musical theatre as soon as possible.
- A training programme in the use of language will be implemented for all HE staff, including freelancers and creatives.

According to the board, it was acknowledged that trustees “had lacked information about the culture that existed within the school of musical theatre and had not been consistently informed of disciplinary issues”.

Burch said: “I am confident that these robust measures are necessary and will deliver the change that is required. I also believe that the report and the investigation itself demonstrate how a school should hold itself to account.”

He said he recognised that the investigation had taken place against the backdrop of a “wider crisis in the industry” and that he welcomed calls for a new independent body with responsibility for driving change in the drama training sector. He said ArtsEd would examine how it can “contribute to the conversation in the months ahead”.

“I am confident that this report will mark the moment where ArtsEd is able to step up and confront those challenges set out in the report and the industry at large,” he added.

Julie Spencer, who has been interim principal since [Hocking was placed on a temporary leave of absence throughout the investigation](#), will continue in the role.