

# Surviving the Coronavirus: Lessons for Australian Training and Skills

by Dr Don Perlgut, CEO, Community Colleges Australia  
10 June 2020

(Available at <https://cca.edu.au/surviving-the-coronavirus-lessons-for-australian-training-and-skills/>)



## Australia During the Coronavirus

Yesterday Australia hit a milestone: the first day since early March with no [cases of COVID-19](#) community transmission. Five Australian states and territories – Western Australia, the Northern Territory, South Australia, Tasmania and the ACT – [have effectively eliminated the virus](#).

The chances of a second wave in Australia – especially in the “warmer” virus spots of New South Wales and Victoria – remain, but we all know that we have [“dodged a bullet”](#).

We are living through momentous times, a [historical inflection point](#) that experts will study well into the next century. What did Australia do right? Why were we so “lucky”?

## What Can We Learn from Our Experience?

As a representative and advocate for Australia’s [not-for-profit adult and community education sector](#), I also ask, “what can we learn for the future of Australian training and skills from our success in preventing widespread pandemic illness and death?”

This is an important question, given our severe economic downturn, the now acknowledged [recession](#), [high unemployment](#), and the devastation inflicted on many industries and sectors, including [international education](#), tourism and hospitality.

I pull two conclusions from this success: the importance of government as a leader and the importance of community action.

## Government Action

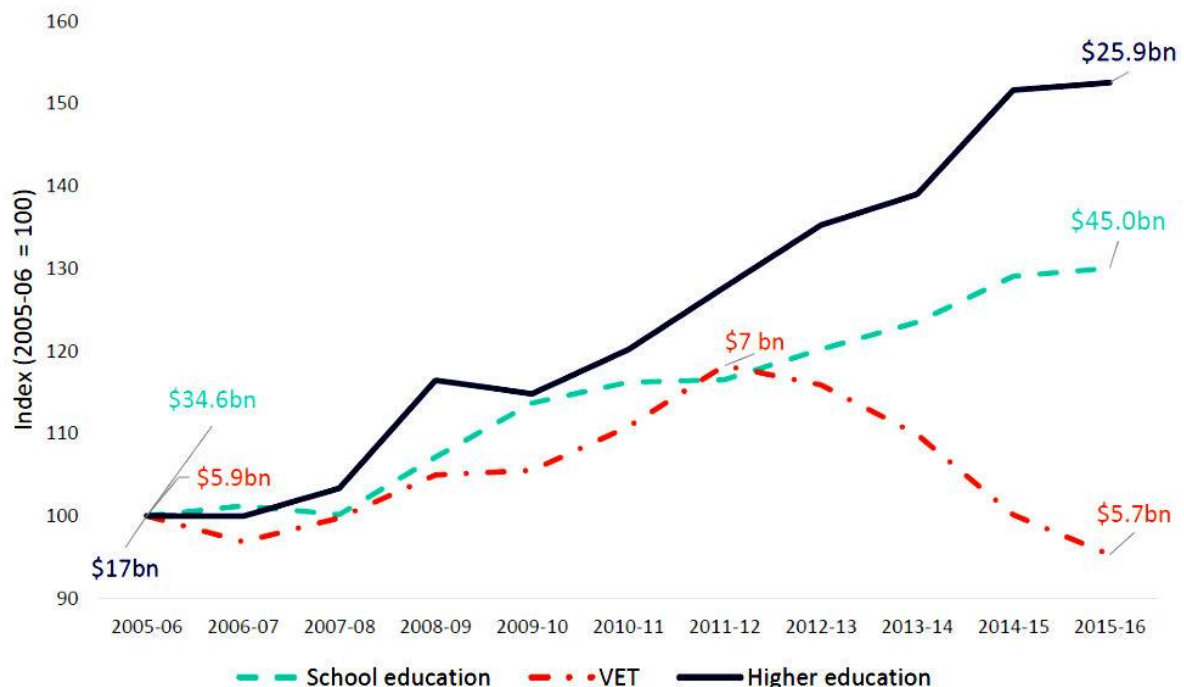
Government action is obvious. Our state and national leaders got together in a [“National Cabinet”](#) and made some sound decisions to shut down social interaction. [“Just in the nick of time”](#), as it turns out. Governments, especially the Commonwealth, are now responsible for a

large part of all [economic activity in Australia](#). Commonwealth interventions – notwithstanding a few notable mistakes and [miscalculations](#) – have been timely, targeted, appreciated and [supported by all sides](#) of the political spectrum.

Less obvious is that [the “snap back” concept](#) – reverting to [private enterprise](#) as the primary means of recovery, the way it was before – won’t work, especially so in areas where the commercialisation was already struggling.

Australian vocational educational and training (VET) is one of these. A couple of decades of [“marketising” Australia’s VET sector](#), so much so that 70% of Australia’s 4.1 million VET students enrolled with private for-profit providers [in 2018](#), including 39% of [government-funded VET](#) students. (Not-for-profit community providers make up 10% of all VET students and 5.6% of government-funded VET. TAFE has most of the remaining students.) For one of the Australia’s greatest [public policy debacles](#), look no further than the [ill-fated VET FEE-HELP program](#), which allowed an unprecedented [national rorting of public funds](#) by private training companies – and a concomitant [destruction of the Australian VET brand](#).

Add to that lagging funding – VET is [the only educational sector with funding to move backwards](#) in recent years (see image below from the [Mitchell Institute](#)) – and a national system that [pushes school-leavers to attend university over VET](#). And there’s the number of providers: around [4000 registered training organisations](#) (RTOs) in Australia. Last year, the Commonwealth’s expert VET reviewer, [Stephen Joyce](#), [wrote](#) of “a bewildering array” of RTOs, group training organisations and “State and Territory agents queuing up to help ... [with] current and future apprentices and trainees.” Compare those numbers to Australia’s simpler university system, where 95% of students attend [one of 37 public universities](#).



Advocates for [Australia’s for-profit VET sector](#) propose to make *all* VET government funding “contestable”, meaning 100% private contracting, based on [“user choice”](#) and cost-efficiency. That unlikely step would not result in quality education fit for Australian post-

Coronavirus economic challenges. That move would see a dramatic collapse of VET delivery to those who need it most, because it's often hard – and expensive – to deliver VET to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged students, including people with disabilities, Indigenous students, students from lower socio-economic status and [those living outside major cities](#). Why do we know this? Because [our research shows](#) that not-for-profit community (and, secondly, TAFE) providers engage far and away the most – by a factor of two (200%) or more – Indigenous, rural and regional, poor and disabled students on a percentage basis, [compared to for-profit providers](#).

The introduction of “[marketisation](#)” (privatisation) competition into VET was meant to increase quality, responsiveness, efficiency, access and more equitable outcomes. [Research by Dr Don Zoellner](#) shows that competition has, on the contrary, particularly disadvantaged regional, rural and remote Australians, as well as disadvantaged learners generally: “The further students were located from the major city region, the greater was the reduction of access to training rather than the promised benefits of the market,” [Dr Zoellner concludes](#). This occurs despite [the greater importance of VET](#) to the economies of regional, rural and remote areas, a result of their business structures and workforce needs.

As Australia pulls through the current economic crisis, there is only one force that can lead – governments, national and state, which will need to simultaneously increase VET funding, simplify the VET system, restore the VET brand and work out the best skills for the future along with how to deliver them. They will also need to deal with [the large number of Australian adults](#) – ranging up to 40% of the population – for whom language, literacy and numeracy (known as “LLN”) – [is imperfect](#) and prevents them from full economic, social and cultural participation.

## Community Action

Australia did not survive this crisis just because of government action. Early this year public health experts [modelled a potential tremendous break-down](#) of our health system, with a worst case pandemic scenario of up to 150,000 deaths and 60% of the population infected. It didn't happen, not even close. Why not?

The [modelling didn't overestimate the risk](#), according to [Professor James McCaw](#): “*Rather it underestimated society's ability to respond and prevent transmission*”.

The modelling was based on the assumption that “only fairly modest levels of social restriction to reduce transmission would be achievable in Australia,” [said Professor Jodie McVernon](#), from the Doherty Institute. The public buy-in of physical distancing, hygiene, isolation and quarantine measures reduced the spread “beyond initial expectations”.

The Australian community – not just a few people, but a large majority of people – understood. We “got it”; [we responded](#); we exceeded the expectations of experts. Thank goodness we did.

That was then, only a few short months ago. But we are also left with a torn economic and social fabric where a complete society and economy once stood.

Mental health expert [Professor Ian Hickie](#) urges us not to fall victim to the hoax of individual resilience: “Resilience is a social group characteristic.” [Jenna Price writes](#): “We will need it. Recessions rend the social fabric and we must rebuild. How we can do that is hard to predict but our anxiety will abate only if we take purposeful action, if we act collectively. Bring others along. This is the time to write a new social contract, one where we extend love and honour and decency and respect, the way we behave during our important rituals, to include all those who inhabit the world around us.”

## Lessons for Australian Skills and Training

What does this mean Australian skills and training in the post-Coronavirus era? A great deal, as it turns out.

*Given the importance of community in dealing with our health, social, cultural and emotional stresses, one Australian VET sub-sector perfectly fits this moment of need: [adult and community education \(ACE\) providers](#), not-for-profit community-managed organisations.*

Almost [400 ACE providers train more than 400,000](#) Australians each year; they do so with a high degree of personal attention, efficiency and unparalleled commitment to society’s most [vulnerable and disadvantaged](#), including [Indigenous Australians](#), people with a disability and [older workers](#). That’s an awfully large number and indicates an educational capacity that governments need to utilise as we enter the early phases of a Coronavirus economic recovery. This recovery needs new skills, but a deeply strained [VET sector has been unable to operate](#) anywhere near capacity.

ACE providers [have operated in Australia](#) since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; some of them – like the WEAs (Workers Education Associations) in Newcastle, Wollongong, Sydney and Adelaide – have operated continuously since 1913. That’s an enviable track record, outlasting all but a handful of Australian post-secondary institutions. What a shame to waste it.

NFP community education providers have an important role in rebuilding the Australian social fabric through [group resilience](#): a large number have combined education and training with community mental health programs.

Now, more than ever before in our lifetimes, we need a partnership between “government” and “community” for a much-needed economic and social recovery. Australian adult and community education providers are essential to that mission.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Don Perlgut**, PhD, CEO, Community Colleges Australia, 10 June 2020

Link to this article: <https://cca.edu.au/surviving-the-coronavirus-lessons-for-australian-training-and-skills/>

(Comments on this piece are welcome; please email CCA at [admin@cca.edu.au](mailto:admin@cca.edu.au)).