



**Community
Colleges
Australia**

**Submission to the Inquiry into Adult Literacy and
its Importance
Standing Committee on Employment, Education
and Training**

**Prepared by
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About Community Colleges Australia

Community Colleges Australia (CCA) is the peak national body that represents community-owned, not-for-profit education and training providers. Our mission is to “strengthen Australian not-for-profit community education as a vital local service,” and our vision is to be “recognised nationally as the leading influencer of quality community education provision through powerful representation, advocacy and support for members at state and national levels.”¹

Our members – adult and community education (known as “ACE”) providers – have been providing flexible and dynamic education and training opportunities to individuals, communities, groups and businesses for a long time, tracing an unbroken history of 108 years back to 1913. As well as operating in accredited vocational education and training (VET), CCA members offer other learning opportunities, including pre-vocational, social purpose and non-accredited training; along with lifestyle, lifelong and cultural learning courses – education for which they are historically well-known. These educational activities help build self-esteem, re-engage “missing” learners – especially those with low literacy, numeracy, language or digital skills – and create and sustain social and community networks, which help to reinforce and sustain the communities in which our members operate.²

Our sector’s history permits our members to be strategic and innovative in their flexibility to employ a wide range of tools. ACE providers play a strategic role because they have the freedom to take considered risks. They are not bound by government structures in the way that TAFEs are, nor are they beholden to private shareholders to supply cash returns in the way of for-profit private providers.

ACE providers have an historic commitment to invest in their communities and respond to the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged Australians, including a commitment to foundation skills. They do this through small class sizes, focussing on personal support, and creating connections to and collaborations with local non-government organisations, government agencies, social services and employers.

This Submission

The House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training Inquiry adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills in Australia terms of reference are:

1. The relationship between adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills and socio-demographic characteristics, particularly migrant status, First Nations status and individuals living in households that have experienced intergenerational unemployment;
2. The effect that literacy and numeracy skills have on an individual’s labour force participation and wages;
3. Links between literacy and social outcomes such as health, poverty, ability to care for other family members and participation in civic life;

¹ Read our 2021-2024 Strategic Plan here: <https://cca.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CCA-Strategic-Plan-2021-2024-Final.pdf>.

² Read details on the role that Australian ACE providers play in sustaining Australian democracy and supporting civil society: <https://cca.edu.au/what-we-do/democracy-and-citizenship/>.

4. The relationship between parents' literacy skills and their children's education and literacy skill development from birth to post-secondary education;
5. Whether changes to schooling in 2020 as a result of COVID-19 will have a disproportionate impact on the skill development of those children of parents with lower literacy and numeracy levels, and, if yes, consideration of appropriate remediation programs which might address this;
6. The availability, impact and effectiveness of adult literacy and numeracy educational programs in Australia and internationally; and
7. International comparisons of government policies and programs that may be adapted to the Australian experience.

This submission from CCA primarily deals with terms of reference numbers 1 and 6, and focusses in particular on the role that ACE providers play in meeting Australia's adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving needs.

Australia's Adult and Community Education Sector in Perspective

Of the 4.2 million Australian vocational education and training (VET) students enrolled in 2019, almost 500,000 (11.6% of the total) studied with a not-for-profit community education provider, an increase of 1.6% on the previous year.³

In addition to community providers, Australian VET students enrolled in TAFE (779,200 students, representing 18.6% of the total); university providers (77,600 students, 1.8%); secondary schools (108,000 students, 2.6%); enterprise providers (124,400 students, 3.0%); and private for-profit providers (3.0 million students, 72.1%).⁴

In addition to the 400+ ACE providers which deliver accredited and pre-accredited VET, more than 2000 other ACE providers offer personal interest learning and other courses, which includes adult basic education in language, literacy, numeracy, digital and other foundation skills.⁵

Students who enrol with ACE providers consistently show the greatest increase into employment of any provider type: 16.8% of community education VET training graduates moved from unemployment to employment in 2018 resulting from their training, compared to 10.1% of TAFE graduates (also the national average), 9.5% of private for-profit training providers, and 7.9% of university VET providers. Compared to other VET provider types, community education graduates were also the most satisfied with assessment, the most satisfied with the overall quality of training and the most willing to recommend their training. Of those employed after training, more community education graduates found the training relevant to their current job and received at least one job-related benefit.⁶

³ See <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/total-vet-students-and-courses-2019>.

⁴ Totals add to more than 100% as students may have enrolled in training with multiple provider types.

⁵ *Adult Community Education Australian Environmental Scan 2020*, Adult Learning Australia, <https://ala.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Australian-ACE-Report-2020.pdf>.

⁶ *NCVER VET Student Outcomes 2019* report, December 2019, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/vet-student-outcomes-2019>.

Student learning is the core business of Australia’s adult and community education providers. They provide this learning through place-based or locally focussed activities, making them unusually responsive to the communities, in which they are deeply embedded.

ACE Providers Deliver Adult Literacy and Foundation Skills

ACE providers play a crucial nationally significant role in adult literacy/numeracy and foundation skills, including teaching English as a second language. State ministerial ACE policy declarations from Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia all acknowledge the importance and role of the adult and community education sector in Australian education, training for employment and participation in society.⁷

The Victorian statement’s first goal is, “To engage and support adult learners who need to develop their core foundation skills for work, further study, and to participate in society as valued citizens.”⁸ This reflects the last Commonwealth statement (2008) – now outdated but still relevant – which states, “Individuals who lack foundation skills, however, face serious limitations in their capacity to enter and survive in the modern workplace, let alone progress beyond low-skilled and low-paid employment,” and an outcome to achieve is that “the working age population have gaps in foundation skills levels reduced to enable effective educational, labour market and social participation.”⁹

The New South Wales statement reads, “ACE providers ... tailor training to meet workplace needs for individuals and business by providing English language, literacy, numeracy, digital literacy and broader foundational skills including transferable ‘soft skills’ which are often a precursor to VET qualifications.... ACE providers are able to bridge program and service gaps with ‘wrap around’ services that improve client outcomes and/or experience, particularly for those needing additional support into, or reintegration back to, work or community life.”¹⁰

The South Australian statement speaks of, “the broad scope of capability within this sector positions ACE as a fundamental part of the solution in lifting foundation skills, increasing social engagement and improving workforce participation.”¹¹

Tasmania also has an adult literacy strategy, supported by 26TEN, a network of organisations and individuals working to improve adult literacy in the state, helping everyone get the skills they need for work and life.¹²

⁷ See NSW <https://cca.edu.au/cca-welcomes-release-of-nsw-adult-and-community-education-policy-statement/>; Victoria <https://cca.edu.au/victorian-government-launches-ministerial-statement-on-the-future-of-adult-community-education/>; and South Australia <https://cca.edu.au/south-australia-recognises-the-value-of-adult-and-community-education/>.

⁸ See <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/training/learners/learnlocal/Future-ACE-2020-25-Ministerial-Statement.pdf>.

⁹ See http://cca.edu.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Ministerial_Declaration_on_Adult_Community_Education_2008.pdf.

¹⁰ See https://www.training.nsw.gov.au/forms_documents/ace/nsw_ace_policy_statement.pdf.

¹¹ See http://www.tasc.sa.gov.au/DesktopModules/Bring2mind/DMX/Download.aspx?Command=Core_Download&EntryId=762&PortalId=5&TabId=1047.

¹² See <https://26ten.tas.gov.au/Pages/Strategy.aspx>.

Australia's not-for-profit community education providers continue to over-perform in delivering foundation skills; this must be an essential part of any national strategy to improve the country's job readiness, both in the current recession and as we proceed through it on the other side.¹³

Terms of Reference 1: The Relationship Between Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Problem-solving Skills and Socio-demographic Characteristics

Background: Disadvantage and Low Adult Literacy and Numeracy

A wealth of international evidence supports the importance of adult literacy; a United Nations report states that literacy is a transformational process that empowers individuals, broadens their critical thinking and provides them with the ability to act.¹⁴ A person without basic literacy lacks real opportunities to engage effectively in the economy, with democratic institutions, to make choices, exercise his/her citizenship rights and act for a perceived common good. Other UN reports support these conclusions, which has been supported by Australian policy research.¹⁵

The Australian Government Productivity Commission quotes the "Social Exclusion Monitor" (SEM) which shows that low formal education, low literacy, low numeracy, poor English and little work experience are highly correlated with the capacity of individuals to participate in society.¹⁶

Extensive reporting from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), Australian Council for Adult Literacy and Adult Learning Australia all detail the direct connections between low literacy/numeracy with economic and employment disadvantage:

- "Poor literacy is one of the barriers for older disadvantaged workers in Australia wanting to return to the workforce after unemployment, redundancy or industry re-adjustment."¹⁷
- "People with limited literacy skills could be potentially locked out of the future economy without adult education programs that include literacy and numeracy targeted at their requirements. A large proportion of the Australian population is at risk of being

¹³ See https://www.ncver.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/83572/Salience-of-diversity-in-foundation-skills.pdf.

¹⁴ See http://www.unesco.org.pk/education/documents/ILD_2012/Notes_on_Literacy_and_Peace.pdf.

¹⁵ See *Foundation skills policy contexts and measures of impact* by Jane Newton, NCVER, 2016, https://www.ncver.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/83151/Foundation-skills-policy-contexts-and-measures-of-impact.pdf; and also *Exploring perspectives on adult language, literacy and numeracy* by Daniella Mayer, NCVER, 2016, https://www.ncver.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/83121/Exploring-perspectives-on-ALLN.pdf.

¹⁶ *Deep and Persistent Disadvantage in Australia*, Australian Government Productivity Commission, July 2013, p. 75, <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/supporting/deep-persistent-disadvantage/deep-persistent-disadvantage.pdf>. Also see *Literacy and Numeracy Skills and Labour Market Outcomes in Australia* at <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/supporting/literacy-numeracy-skills>.

¹⁷ *Social and economic benefits of improved adult literacy: Towards a better understanding*, by Robyn Hartley Jackie Horne, 2006, p. 22, <https://ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/social-and-economic-benefits-of-improved-adult-literacy-towards-a-better-understanding>.

permanently in this state. Those at risk include Indigenous Australians; people from non-English speaking backgrounds as well as native speakers; people living in rural and remote areas of the country; people with physical and intellectual disabilities; some aged Australians as well as many young people.”¹⁸

- “The incomes of persons in employment are strongly related to literacy/numeracy. This relationship was found to be at least as strong as the relationship between educational qualifications and income. Addressing the literacy and numeracy levels of low SES families and communities is an important way to address intergenerational poverty and disadvantage.”¹⁹

Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Australians

Australia’s not-for-profit adult and community education providers have developed a special ability to reach and engage with vulnerable and disadvantaged Australians. The next section of this submission details how pre-vocational and vocational training provides a very important pathway for vulnerable and disadvantaged learners to achieve post-secondary education qualifications and thus enhance their abilities to participate in a competitive modern job market. It is important to consider the education and training experiences of vulnerable and disadvantaged people.

Elizabeth Shearer has described the challenges for consumers, which is very applicable for adult learners who frequently have a wide choice of learning opportunities:

Consumers in a modern market economy often experience information asymmetry and a significant imbalance of bargaining power. They have limited freedom to choose the conditions upon which they contract to purchase goods and services. Even sophisticated consumers, who can read and understand the fine print, have little opportunity to change it.²⁰

The Productivity Commission considered the matter the special needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers in its 2008 review of Australia’s consumer policy framework, a process which led directly to the passage and implementation of Australia’s *National Consumer Credit Protection Act 2009*.²¹

¹⁸ *A Literate Australia*, National Position Paper on the Future Adult Literacy and Numeracy Needs of Australia, by Australian Council for Adult Literacy, 2001, p. 10, https://www.acal.edu.au/publications/papers/acal_view/ALitAustOct01.pdf.

¹⁹ *Let’s get serious about adult literacy and numeracy*, Adult Learning Australia and Australian Education Union, 2011, p. 7, <https://ala.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Lets-Get-Serious-about-Adult-Litearcy-and-Numeracy3.pdf>.

²⁰ Elizabeth Shearer, November 2010, “Consumer Protection Laws: Access to Justice for Vulnerable Consumers”, p. 1, <http://managingjustice.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/LawAsia-paper-Nov-2010.pdf>.

²¹ Productivity Commission 2008, *Review of Australia’s Consumer Policy Framework*, Volume 2, Productivity Commission Inquiry Report No 45, 30 April 2008, Canberra, accessed at <http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/consumer-policy/report>. Subsequent quotations in the text are all from this Report.

Details of the Act can be found at http://www8.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdb/au/legis/cth/num_act/nccpa2009377/.

The Productivity Commission's *Review of Australia's Consumer Policy Framework* sets out clear definitions of "vulnerable" and "disadvantaged" Australians, definitions that continue to resonate and apply 13 years later (see p. 295):

Disadvantage can be seen as reflecting a set of individual traits – such as poverty, low education, disability, or poor English proficiency – that increase the risk of a consumer experiencing detriment or/and intensify the adverse consequences of that detriment. Disadvantage is typically persistent and hard to change, particularly through consumer policy. Vulnerability is a broader term relating to a particular susceptibility of consumers to detriment based on both their personal characteristics (including, but not limited to disadvantage) and the specific context in which they find themselves (market features, product qualities, the nature of the transaction, the regulatory environment).

Disadvantage and vulnerability often overlap, but they can be distinct. For instance, in markets where the quality of services is hard to discern and convey to consumers, many will be vulnerable, despite not being disadvantaged. Conversely, for straightforward purchases, it is possible that someone who might be categorised as disadvantaged would not be particularly vulnerable, much of the time – many people on low incomes are very careful and astute consumers and have learned strategies that reduce future susceptibility in a repeat situation.

Who are these vulnerable and disadvantaged Australians? A large number of young people (25 or younger) and older Australians (older than 65) may be vulnerable, but may not particularly disadvantaged economically or socially. Vulnerable groups at great risk of high disadvantage include Indigenous Australians; people from lower socio-economic backgrounds; people with poor telecommunications access – the "deepening digital divide" (up to 15% of all Australians)²²; rural, regional and remote residents²³; and people whose native language is not English.

The Commission's 2008 report concluded that there are larger numbers of vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers than ever before. It examined how:

Consumers themselves are changing. As a result of better education and greater access to information and guidance through the Internet, many are now more able to judge the merits of even complex products and services. But the increasing complexity of markets and demographic changes – such as population ageing and the greater proportion of consumers from non-English speaking backgrounds – may have simultaneously increased the pool of vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers at risk of suffering detriment. So too may have the increasing market participation of young people. (p. 7)

²² See "Australia's digital divide is not going away", *The Conversation*, 29 March 2018, <https://theconversation.com/australias-digital-divide-is-not-going-away-91834>; "Digital divide: 2.5 million Australians with no internet connection," by Fergus Hunter, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/digital-divide-2-5-million-australians-isolated-with-no-internet-connection-20200327-p54egn.html>.

²³ See http://ruralhealth.org.au/documents/publicseminars/2013_Sep/Joint-report.pdf; <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/family-matters/issue-37/regional-disadvantage-and-unemployment>; <https://theconversation.com/unravelling-why-geography-is-australias-biggest-silent-killer-23238>; and <http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/home/2015/11/human-capital/>.

The Commission's Report also noted the difficulty that some consumers have in making decisions, particularly relevant to recent Australian VET experience:

The ability to make well-informed decisions can also be impaired by the circumstances under which the decision is made.... There are situations in which most consumers will be vulnerable to poor decision-making.... Time constraints may also limit the ability of consumers to fully inform themselves, with constraints sometimes being imposed by 'high pressure' sales techniques. (p. 34)

The Report further noted:

In addition to achieving important social justice objectives, intervention on behalf of vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers can also improve the confidence with which these consumers interact with suppliers, encouraging greater market participation and enhancing overall efficiency. (p. 35)

Based on this evidence – including the Productivity Commission's research – CCA strongly believes that the policies of Australian Commonwealth, state and territory governments need to provide significant guidance and direct intervention for government-funded adult literacy and foundation skills services for vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers. The best way to do this is to ensure that these services are provided by community-based not-for-profit (ACE) providers and government-run organisations (i.e. TAFE).

Clear examples of services for vulnerable and disadvantaged learners include essential foundation skills and other adult basic education programs, including digital skills and employability. Support for this view (quoted by the 2008 Productivity Commission Report) comes from Eastern Access Community Health, which stated that, "Well-informed consumers are largely absent from the markets in which low income, disadvantaged and vulnerable consumers participate." (p. 295)

A July 2016 United Kingdom government report (the *Post-16 Skills Plan*) also provides extensive support for this view.²⁴ Gavin Moodie has reported that:

The panel estimated that at least 30% of government funding for English vocational education is allocated to private providers. But there was a strong view that public funds should not be allocated in this way ... publicly subsidised technical education should be delivered under not-for-profit arrangements and that new government funding should be 'prioritised towards colleges and training providers who intend to reinvest all surpluses into education infrastructure'.²⁵

The report continued:

Given what appears to be the highly unusual nature of this arrangement compared to other countries and the high costs associated with offering world-class technical

²⁴ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-skills-plan-and-independent-report-on-technical-education>.

²⁵ Gavin Moodie, "What Australia can learn from England's plan for vocational education", 22 July 2016, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/what-australia-can-learn-from-englands-plan-for-vocational-education-62418>.

education, we see a strong case for public funding for education and training to be restricted to institutions where surpluses are reinvested into the country's education infrastructure.²⁶

Terms of Reference 6: The availability, impact and effectiveness of adult literacy and numeracy educational programs in Australia and internationally

Adult and Community Education Providers Serve Australia's Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Learners

Given the clear and direct connection between low literacy and disadvantage and low economic/employment outcomes, it is important to recognise the unique role that Australia's ACE providers play in delivering literacy, numeracy and other "foundation" skills to high percentages of Australia's most vulnerable and disadvantaged learners, including the achievements in lifting unemployed learners into employment

Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Students

According to Tom Karmel and Patrick Lim, "the distribution of VET students is over-represented among groups of lower socioeconomic status, while the distribution of higher education students is under-represented in this group." In addition, low SES students are particularly clustered in VET Certificates I and II (foundation skills, adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills), with higher SES students most prominent studying at diploma level.²⁷

Table 1 (below) compares 2018 Australian enrolment percentages for specific vulnerable and disadvantaged groups across the university sector (column 1), all vocational education and training students (column 2) and sub-set of not-for-profit community education (ACE) provider VET students (column 3).

The results show a distinct pattern of how most VET students are, on balance, a much more disadvantaged group than university students. Of VET students, ACE students are further much more disadvantaged.

In comparison to university students, twice as many community education students are "low SES" (in the bottom quarter - 25%); have a disability; or live in regional, rural and remote areas. In addition, community education providers enrol four times as many Indigenous learners and more than seven times as many people from non-English speaking backgrounds. Although data on the number of adults aged 45+ is not easily available for university enrolments, that information has been included for total VET enrolments and community education students. The clear conclusion from so many adult enrolments in the community education sector is that sector provides one of the most efficient ways to engage Australian adults who might otherwise be marginalised.

²⁶ Quoted by Gavin Moodie, <https://theconversation.com/what-australia-can-learn-from-englands-plan-for-vocational-education-62418>.

²⁷ Source: Tom Karmel and Patrick Lim, *Socioeconomic disadvantage and participation in tertiary education: preliminary thoughts*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2013, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/data/assets/file/0024/9393/socioeconomic-disadvantage-2612.pdf>.

Table 1: Australian University, VET and Community Education Student Cohorts: Equity Group Percentages Compared, 2018

Student Group	University student enrolment proportions (%)	Total VET students program enrolments (%)	ACE provider students program enrolments (%)
Low SES (bottom 25%)	17.0	28.2	34.6
Students with a disability	7.3	8.0	16.0
Indigenous	1.9	5.9	7.6
Regional and rural	19.8	31.2	36.6
Remote and very remote	0.8	2.6	2.1
Non-English speaking background	3.4	24.1	25.3
Adults aged 45+	n/a	15.9	25.3

Table notes: Figures exclude “not known” respondents, where students have not reported the data. “Low SES” represents the bottom quarter (25%) of students. In the case of VET and Community Education provider student enrolments, this figure is an estimate extrapolated from VET students in the bottom “quintile” (20%).²⁸

Regional and Rural Students

Vocational training – including at the level of foundation skills is far more important to regional, rural and remote Australians than to those living in metropolitan areas, with VET participation rates on average more than 50% greater in non-metropolitan areas. This is especially pronounced in NSW, but is evident in all states and territories. CCA has made this point in three of its reports:

- *Community Education Providers and Western Sydney Regional Economic Development*, May 2019²⁹;
- *The Role of New South Wales Community Education Providers in Regional and Rural Economic Development*, January 2018³⁰; and
- *The Role of Community Education in Australian Regional and Rural Economic Development - research, policy and recommendations to the Commonwealth, state and territory governments*, February 2017.³¹

²⁸ Table sources: University: Paul Koshy, Equity Student Participation in Australian Higher Education: 2013 – 2018. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University, Perth, 2019, Table 3, p. 7, https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/NCSEHE-Equity-Student-Briefing-Note_2013-18_Accessible_Final.pdf; Total VET and Community Providers: National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), Total VET students and courses 2018, Adelaide, 6 September 2019, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/data/all-data/total-vet-students-and-courses-2018-data-slicer>.

²⁹ Available at <https://cca.edu.au/home/western-sydney-regional-economic-development-report-summary/>.

³⁰ Available at <https://cca.edu.au/home/nsw-regional-and-rural-economic-development-report-summary/>.

³¹ Available at <https://cca.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/The-Role-of-Community-Education-in-Regional-and-Rural-Economic-Development-7February2017.pdf>.

VET participation rates are also not uniform across Australia, according the figures in Table 2: Victoria, New South Wales and South Australian rates run much higher than Queensland, Western Australia and Northern Territory, particularly notable in inner and outer regional areas.

Table 2: Australian VET Participation by Location and State/Territory

Indicator	Metro %	Inner Regional %	Outer Regional %	Remote %	Very Remote %
NSW	6.3	11.9	14.6	15.4	18.5
VIC	10.3	13.9	16.6	19.8	-
QLD	5.9	7.8	7.9	8.4	10.4
SA	8.2	10.8	12.5	13.5	12.9
WA	6.1	7.5	10.8	12.1	9.6
TAS	-	8.6	10.6	13.4	14.6
NT	-	-	8.6	13.2	9.9
Australia	7.4	10.7	11.2	11.9	10.4

Table Source: Compiled by PHIDU based on data from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2012; and the ABS Estimated Resident Population, 30 June 2012 (released October 2014).³²

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria notes that rural and regional students “are more likely to be dealing with socio-economic and educational disadvantage, so tend to go into VET with relatively low levels of previous qualification and are more likely to take Certificate courses at junior levels.”³³ This has long-term impacts on their educational achievement levels, as well as the nature of which VET courses are in greatest demand.

A 2010 Skills Australia report also refers to the type of VET undertaken in regional and rural Australia:

Approximately 45 per cent of VET students are in regional, rural and remote Australia, compared to 20 per cent of higher education students. The qualifications being studied by VET students also suggest the sector plays a role in laying the foundations for an educational pathway in the regions. Lower level qualifications (Certificate III and below) are a feature of the qualification profile of VET students especially in the outer regions and remote areas. Higher level studies of Certificate IV and above are a more marked characteristic of those enrolled in major cities.³⁴

The flexibility and practicality of vocational education and training has meant that the sector “has responded particularly well to the broader social issues especially apparent in regional centres, such as an ageing population and the growing number of retirees.”³⁵ Nevertheless, as the Australian Human Rights Commission has pointed out, rural distance and lack of accessibility often means that, “There are still too few opportunities for secondary-aged

³² See <http://phidu.torrens.edu.au/current/graphs/sha-aust/remoteness/aust/education.html>.

³³ Source: Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, <http://www.yacvic.org.au/policy-publications/publications-listed-by-policy-area/27-education-and-training/414-vet-and-young-victorians> and <https://www.yacvic.org.au/assets/Documents/SUB-YACVic-submission-to-Victorian-VET-Review-April-2015.pdf>.

³⁴ Source: Skills Australia, <http://www.rdasdney.org.au/imagesDB/wysiwyg/discussionpaper-creatingnewdirectionforVET-hr.pdf>, pp. 32-33.

³⁵ Source: http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/749/1/Building_learning_communities.pdf, p. 6.

students to participate in vocational education and training courses of relevance to the industries and businesses in their local areas.”³⁶

In addition, Indigenous Australians live in regional and rural Australia in greater percentages than their share of the Australian population (3%). Indigenous Australians also participate in vocational education and training in much greater percentages than non-Indigenous Australians. In a 2015 report, the Productivity Commission stated:

Nationally, the participation rate in government funded VET for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15–64 years was 17.4 per cent in 2013, compared with 16.9 per cent in 2009 and 15.1 per cent in 2004. The participation rate for the non-Indigenous population aged 15–64 years was 8.9 per cent in 2013, compared with 7.5 per cent in 2009 and 7.0 per cent in 2004.³⁷

Indigenous participation in VET runs more than double that of non-Indigenous participation (Table 1 above), and approximately one-half that of non-Indigenous participation in universities.³⁸

The differences shown in the tables above are even more pronounced when examining the figures from Government-funded VET. For instance, in New South Wales (Table 3 below), NCVET data (2018) shows that community education providers out-perform both TAFE and private for-profit providers in just about every category of disadvantage and vulnerability except non-English speaking background. Most of these differences are extremely significant, especially older workers (more than double), people with a disability (double to triple), and regional/rural/remote (double).

Table 3: Comparison of NSW Community Education, TAFE and Private for-profit Student Percentages by Provider Type by Vulnerability/Disadvantage

Category	Community Education (student %)	TAFE and govt (student %)	Private for-Profit and other providers (student %)
Aged 45+	41.9	18.8	19.3
With a disability	18.7	11.9	7.2
Indigenous	12.6	9.4	6.4
Non-English speaking background	10.8	21.3	11.2
Rural regional and remote	68.3	35.3	29.5
Socio-economic disadvantage (SEIFA)	65.5	51.2	52.4
Female	58.1	51.4	48.7

Table source: *Government-funded students and courses 2018*, NCVET, July 2019³⁹

³⁶ See “Recommendations”, p. 80, <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/projects/rural-and-remote-education-inquiry>.

³⁷ Source: Productivity Commission, <http://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/indigenous-compedium-2015>, pp. 5.5-5.6. The report also notes that “These student participation data are not age standardised, so the younger age profile of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population relative to all Australians is likely to affect the results.”

³⁸ Also see NCVET, *Indigenous VET participation, completion and outcomes: change over the past decade*, 2017, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/indigenous-vet-participation-completion-and-outcomes-change-over-the-past-decade>.

³⁹ Available at <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/government-funded-students-and-courses-2018>.

Further Information

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