

# Engaging vulnerable and disadvantaged students: Lessons from Australia's adult and community education providers

Don Perlgut, PhD  
Community Colleges Australia

Engagement Australia Conference  
Sydney, 22 November 2022





# Presentation Outline and Purpose

1. Summarise impact of rising wealth inequality
2. Capacity & expertise of Australia's NFP adult and community education (ACE) sector
3. Compare ACE, VET & university sectors ability to reach disadvantaged groups
4. Three case studies of ACE social enterprises integrated with VET
5. Why ACE engages well with disadvantaged learners and communities
6. Eight ways for ACE to make Australia more equal and just



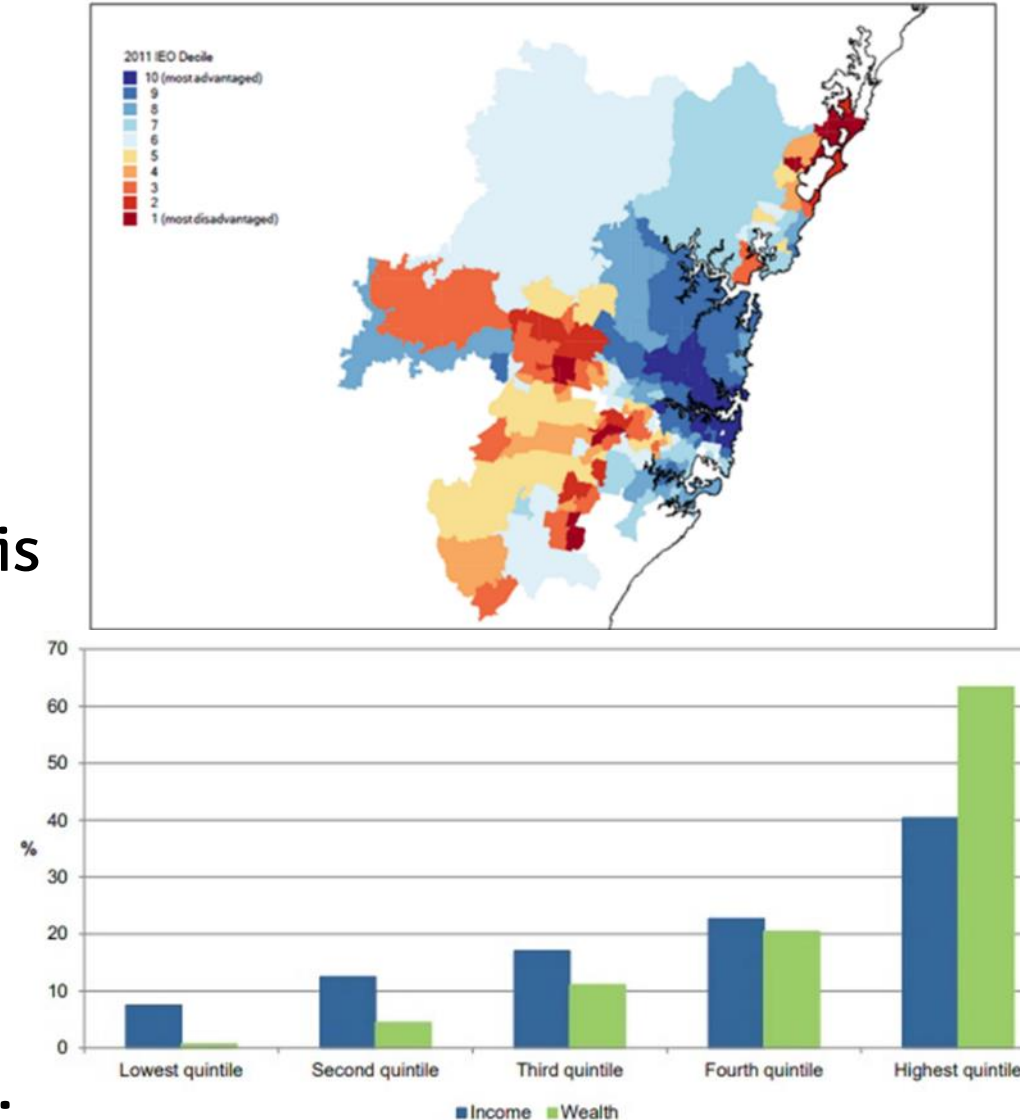


# This Presentation

**Community Colleges Australia (CCA):** National representative association of Australian not-for-profit (NFP, for purpose) adult and community education

## Biases and Values

- Education an important force to tackle inequality of wealth and income.
- Education for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups is best delivered when provided by NFP or public institutions, not for-profits.
- Australian poverty and wealth are geographically concentrated, yet we often ignore the geography of post-secondary education delivery.
- Online delivery is not the answer for disadvantaged: poor access to computers, broadband & digital skills.





# Distribution of Wealth

The New York Times

## *A Billionaires' World*

The world's richest person didn't like Twitter. So he's buying it.

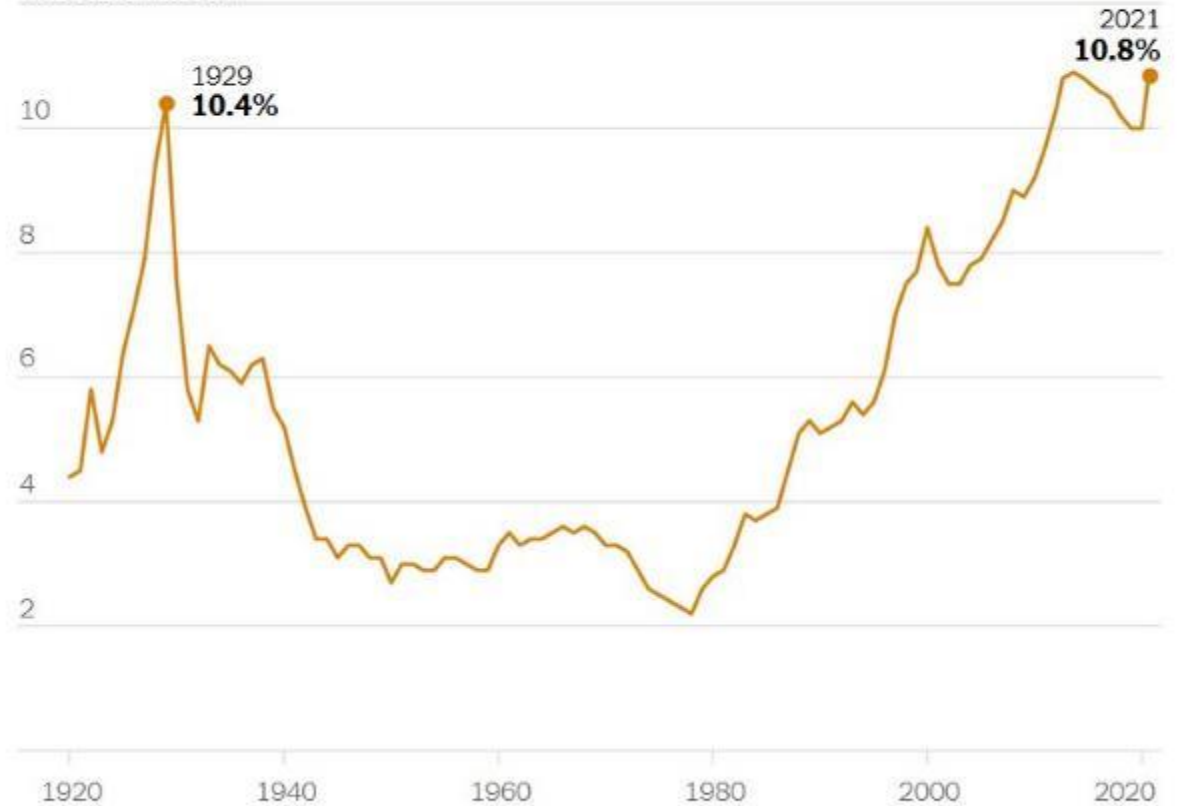
Give this article



Elon Musk Pool photo by Patrick Pleul

## Share of wealth in the U.S. owned by the top 0.01% of households

12% of total wealth

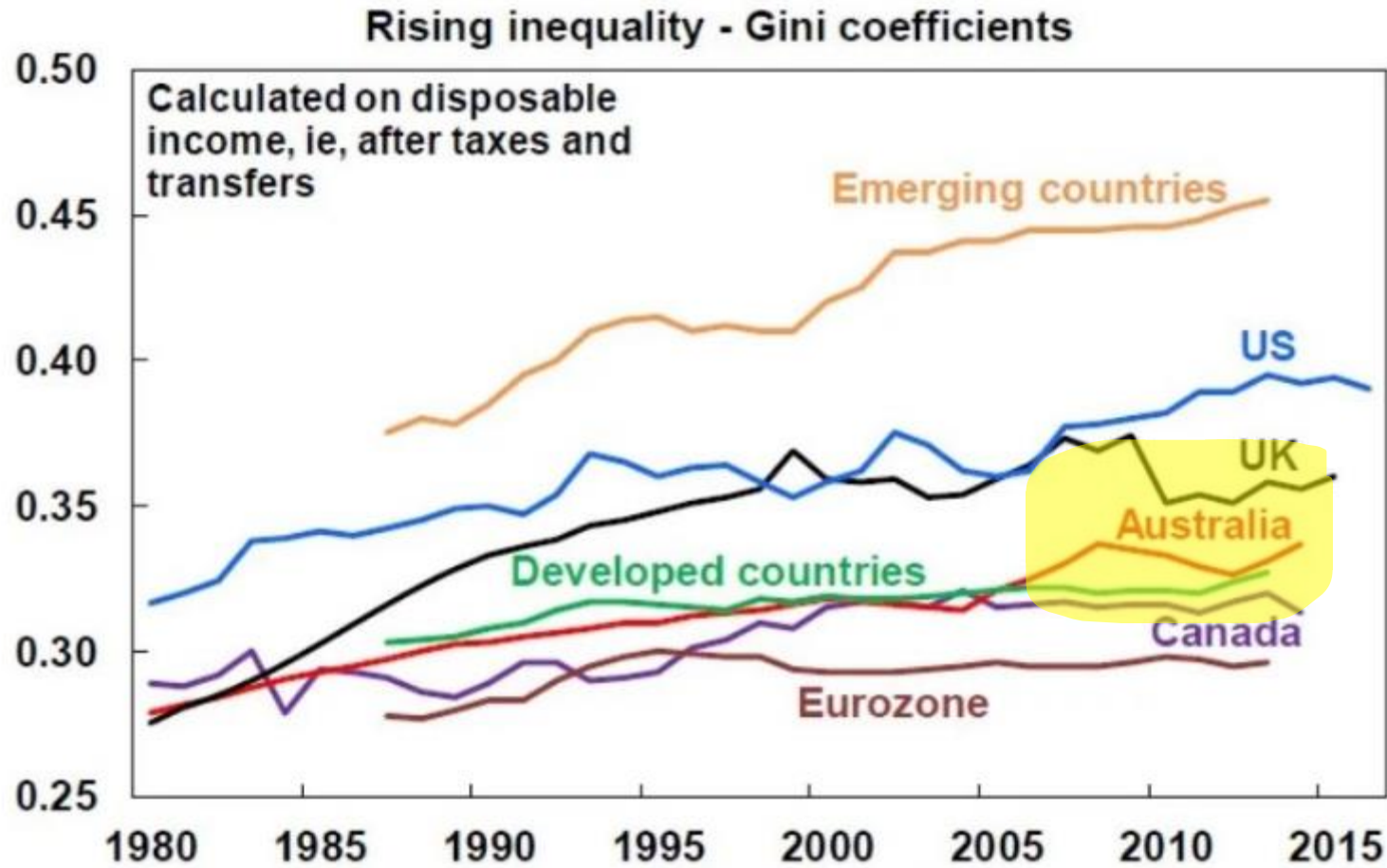


Source: Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman • By The New York Times

*The New York Times*, 26 April 2022, by David Leonhardt; <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/26/briefing/elon-musk-twitter-sale.html>



# Inequality in Australia Compared



Source: OECD, Standardised World Income Inequality Database, AMP Capital



# Australian Adult and Community Education (ACE)

**The History:** NFP community-based learning links directly to 1913 ([Workers Education Associations - WEA](#)) and even 1833 ([Sydney Mechanics School of Arts](#)). Focus on community development integrated with adult learning; @ 400 ACE registered training organisations

**Students:** Of the 4.3 million VET students in 2021, **449,500 (10.5%)** studied with a not-for-profit ACE provider (increase > 2021 of 15.2%)

**ACE best performance** of any VET sector *at engaging women* and vulnerable and disadvantaged students:

- First Nations
- People with a disability
- Migrants, refugees & people from non-English speaking background
- Lower socio-economic backgrounds (bottom 40% of wealth & income)
- Regional and rural residents
- Older (45+) learners
- lifting unemployed people into employment: **12%** ACE graduates moved from unemployment to employment in 2020, greatest increase

**Aged Care:** Very important role in national aged care workforce training: **23%** of NSW Certificate III Individual support (Ageing) government-funded students, **19%** in VIC, **13%** nationally.



**Disadvantaged learners have withdrawn from training due to COVID-19, floods and other natural disasters.**



# Vocational and Community Education Out-Performs Universities



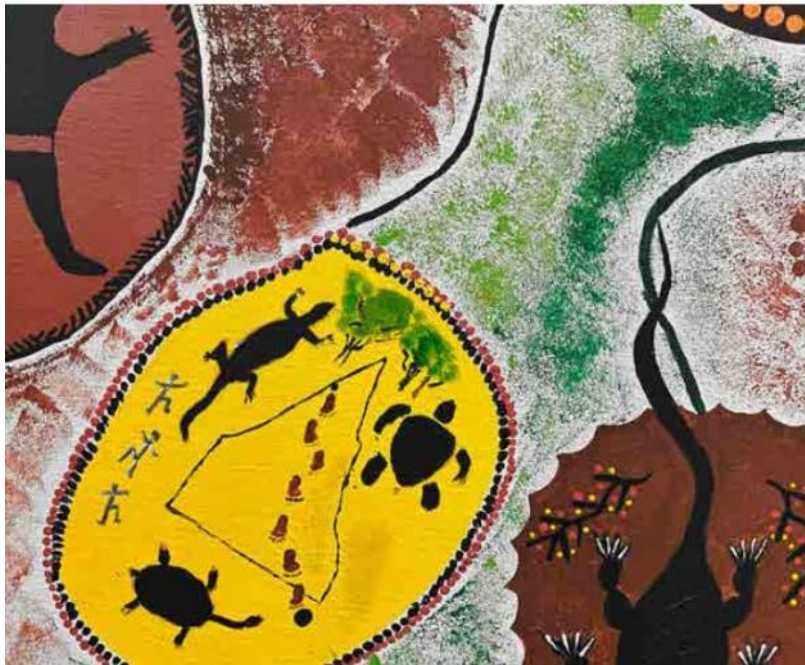
Student Group	University student enrolment proportions (%)	Total VET students program enrolments (%)	Community Education students program enrolments (%)
Low SES (bottom 25%)	17.0	28.2	34.6
Students with a disability	7.3	8.0	16.0
Indigenous	1.9	5.9	7.6
Regional and rural	19.8	31.2	36.6
Remote and very 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 available in *The Role of Adult and Community Education Providers in Sustaining Australian Democracy: A Discussion Paper*, 9 January 2020, by Dr Don Perlmut; <https://cca.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Role-of-adult-and-community-education-in-sustaining-Australian-democracy-and-supporting-civil-society-Jan2020.pdf>



# Indigenous Participation in VET

## Engaging Indigenous Communities



### Indigenous VET participation rate age 15-64 (%) (2015)

Indigenous participation (%)	18.7
Non-Indigenous participation (%)	9.3
All Australians participation (%)	9.9

### Indigenous higher ed participation rate, 15-64 (%) (2015)

Indigenous participation (%)	3.6
Non-Indigenous participation (%)	6.7
All Australians participation (%)	6.6

**Summary:** Indigenous Australians participate in VET at approximately double the rate of non-Indigenous Australians, but in higher education at about one-half the rate.



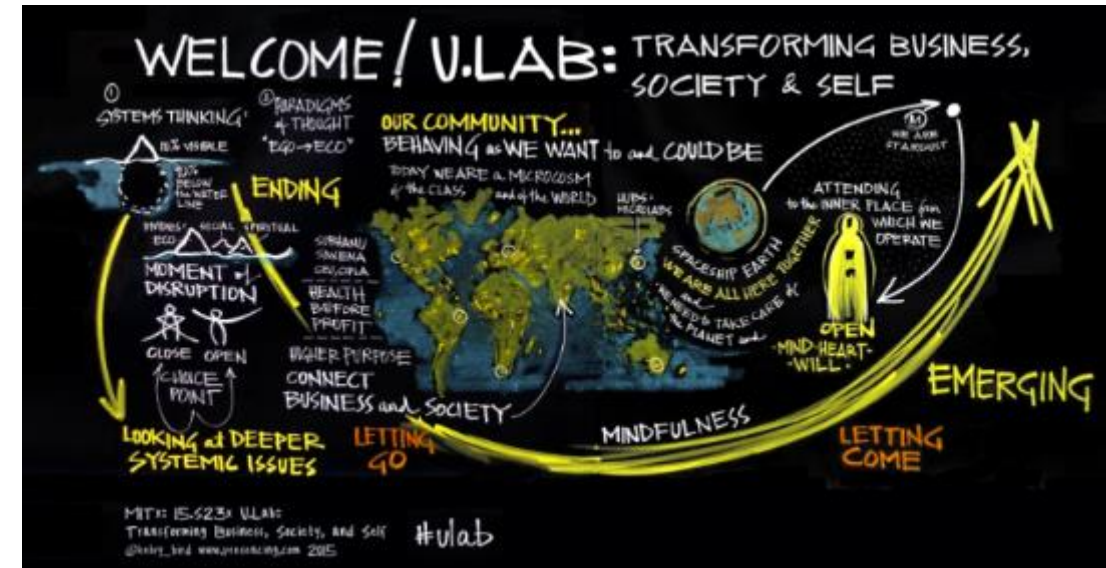
# Community Engagement at Work: Byron's Sourdough Business Pathways

From startups to existing businesses wanting to expand, **Sourdough Business Pathways** supports your business growth through

- extensive mentoring
- accelerator programs
- education workshops
- events & resources



We empower businesses to grow & flourish, support innovative entrepreneurs to create new businesses, and generate jobs within our region.





**Second Stitch** is a social enterprise that empowers women from diverse backgrounds economically and socially through textiles.

**Education is fundamental to our enterprise.** As an umbrella to our parent company VICSEG New Futures, we offer a range of training opportunities that aim to economically empower women in Melbourne. Our studio operates as a training space for our students.



Certificate III in Clothing and Textile Production



# Community Engagement at Work: JobQuest Property Maintenance

JobQuest's social enterprise provides work for disadvantaged job seekers - long term unemployed, people with disabilities, refugees with limited language skills, homeless or at risk youth. Participants work complete property maintenance such as cleaning, lawn mowing, edging, hedging, pressure washing, mulching, composting, removing rubbish & more. The aim is to assist jobseekers to develop confidence and employability skills so they become competitive in open labour market.

**>100 participants have gained employment.**





# Importance of VET to Regional and Rural Australia

VET is important in rural and regional Australia: economic structures. Participation rates are at least 50% higher in rural and regional NSW:

- 6.3% metro
- 11.9% inner regional
- 14.6% outer regional
- 15.4% remote
- 18.5% very remote

A larger percentage of regional and rural VET students study lower level qualifications: Certificate III and below, just those qualifications offered by community education providers.

***Regional and rural VET delivery by community providers*** at least 10% nationally and more than 20% in Victoria, making community providers a significant national force in non-metropolitan Australia.

See [\*The Role of Community Education Providers in Regional and Rural Economic Development\*](#) (Community Colleges Australia, February 2017)





# Why are ACE Providers Engage Disadvantaged Learners Well

**NFP status and mission/purpose** to do good: “Positively transform the lives of individuals, families and communities”

**Place-based**, builds on local & regional strengths to create pathways to jobs

**Develop & sustain partnerships:** government, NFP & businesses, develop job skills, encourage economic devt & citizen participation

**Learner-centred**, small class sizes, personal and student support

**Collaboration** with other ACE providers, leverage collective strengths

**Flexible**, agile & quick, employ tools & freedom to take risks

**Not bound by government structures** like TAFEs

**Not beholden** to shareholders to make a profit

**Invest in local communities:** human, social & economic capital





# 8 Ways for ACE to Make Australia More Equal and Just

1. Create **proper pathways**, from ACE to TAFE and ACE to universities.
2. Take **post-secondary education precincts** seriously – university, TAFE and ACE.
3. Universities can **assist ACE (VET) with intellectual capacity** for evaluation & research.
4. Develop **regional skills plans**, metro & non-metro, prioritising social justice goals & considering needs of disadvantaged learners and communities – VET and university.
5. Fund *place-based* **foundation skills** – language, literacy, numeracy, digital and employability skills – properly, recognising the importance of skilled FS trainers.
6. Ensure **ACE is properly funded** – with 7.2% inflation to 30 September 2022, ACE funding is heading backwards.
7. Implement a **national post-secondary outreach program to re-engage** disadvantaged & vulnerable learners who left education/training due to COVID-19 & natural disasters.
8. Renew the **national-state-territory policy statement** on the value and place of ACE and its place in Australian skills and training, to update the 2008 Ministerial statement.



**Don Perlgut, PhD**  
**CEO**  
**Community Colleges Australia**

**Email**  
[don.perlgut@cca.edu.au](mailto:don.perlgut@cca.edu.au)

**Engagement Australia Conference**  
**22 November 2022**

