

## Policy, Place and Partnership: The Interoperable Tertiary System Presentation by Dr Don Perlgut, CCA CEO

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(Presented as part of a panel discussion at the [AVETRA Conference](#) in Melbourne.)

Today's discussion on the "interoperable tertiary system" is an important one, as we manage the numerous current changes and challenges facing Australian post-secondary education. In my presentation, I deal with each of the three "Ps" under discussion:

- **Partnership:** How to create educational and training pathways between different provider types, in ways that make sense to learners.
- **Place:** How to enhance place-based training – the core of so much VET – in a time when the world has gone digital and online?
- **Policy:** What policies do we need that support the engagement of disadvantaged learners, and how can a connected post-secondary education system can best meet their needs?

### Partnership and Pathways

We have an acute need to create and sustain post-secondary learner pathways. The [Productivity Commission's \*From Learning to Growth\*](#) report states:

The education sector needs to adapt to emerging skills requirements of the Australian economy. The skills demanded have been shifting, and there is also likely to be ongoing structural adjustment in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over time, technological change and automation has replaced or enhanced aspects of some jobs, and generated demand for others. An increasing proportion of jobs require non-routine skills, which typically demand workers with higher levels of education or training.

Other than through migration, [soon to crest at almost unprecedented rates](#) – with its associated negatives – the ONLY way that Australia can increase its workforce skill base is by (1) investing heavily in foundation skills; and (2) encouraging and mandating pathways and collaboration between adult and community education (ACE) providers and TAFE, and between VET and universities. Unfortunately, I see too little of this collaboration taking place, with too little interest or motivation by TAFEs and many universities to develop proper pathways.

### Place

In part because of the accomplished [place-based approach](#) ACE providers take to their training, and their ability to partner easily with employers, who trust the quality training ACE students receive, and our sector's achieve the greatest increase of any VET sector [in moving students from unemployment to employment](#).

We must create a balance between online learning and in-person learning in VET. More than three years into the pandemic, the tremendous rush to move post-secondary education to online platforms must

ease. VET providers and our regulators have no excuse to let the quality of learning deteriorate through inappropriate and poorly delivered online learning accompanied by reduction or elimination of in-person learning. As social commentator [Hugh Mackay writes](#):

No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship ... no significant relationship can occur without empathy and empathy needs human presence.... The difference between online and face-to-face relationships can be captured in that one word: empathy.

A recent [report from the Reading Writing Hotline](#) concludes:

- Face to face individualised and learner-centred delivery is what works best for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy (LND) learners.
- Online courses can provide access for some. However, the digital divide and low LND skills make it a less appropriate delivery mode for most LND learners.
- Face to face teaching and learning models have higher delivery costs than digital and online learning.

We are short-changing our learners and short-changing our national skills base by cutting back on the quantity and quality of human teaching in skills and training. I have great concerns that, for instance, the Certificate III in Individual Support (aged care) has gone almost fully online for many providers.

## Policy

Unfortunately, inequality of wealth and income inequality is growing in Australia. Earlier this month, the Australia Institute [released its study](#) *Inequality on Steroids: The Distribution of Economic Growth in Australia*, which reports:

Since World War Two, the majority of the benefits of economic growth have flowed to the bottom 90% of income earners. However ... between 2009 and 2019 the top 10% got almost all of the gains of the latest recovery: that group secured 93% of the income growth in that period.... How long can Australia sustain an economic and social setting which excludes the bulk of its people from sharing in the economic gains?" [See Figure 1 below.]

The [Sydney Morning Herald](#) warns:

Political chaos is the symptom, inequality the sickness. The most shocking fact emerging from America is not Trumpism but its underlying cause: an inchoate grievance against gross inequality.

The Productivity Commission [decisively concludes](#):

Investment in education has been found to reduce inequality and generally ‘improves society by increasing equity and social cohesion’, potentially improving the prospects of the most disadvantaged students by fostering social mobility.

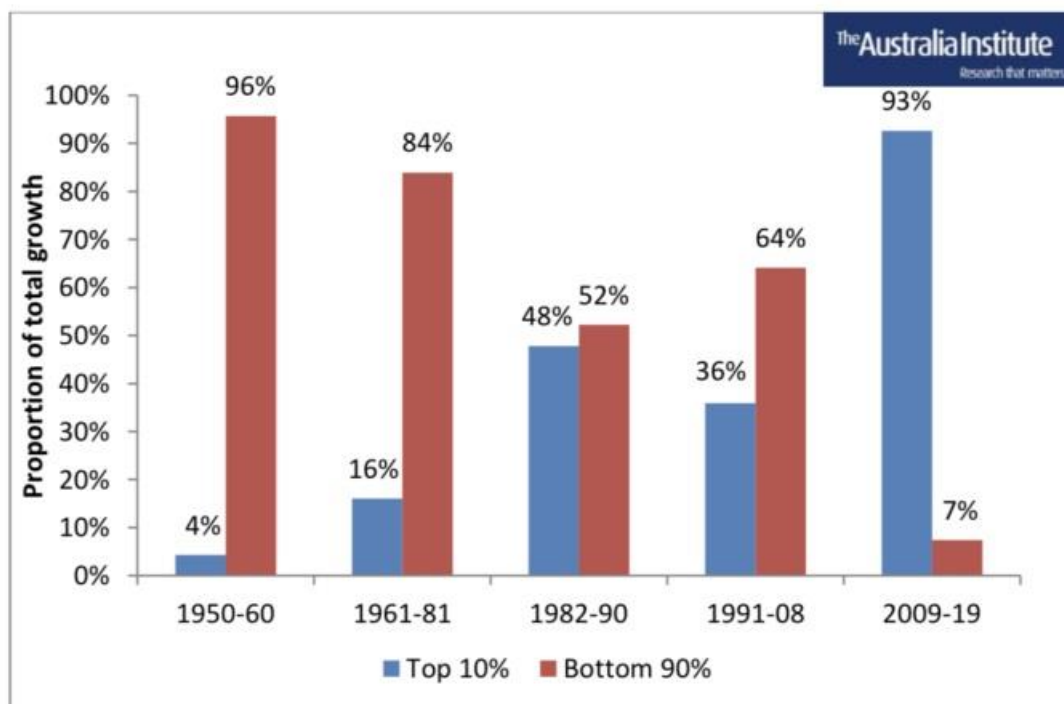
While many of the root causes of growing inequality lie in [distorted taxation policies](#), VET [has a tremendous role to play](#) in solutions by lifting the skills – and associated economic strengths – of the most disadvantaged groups. VET students are often drawn from lower socio-economic status groups and frequently live in areas where VET is more highly valued, such as [rural and regional Australia](#), where VET participation rates average 50% higher than in metro areas. A much larger percentage of rural and regional VET students also study lower-level qualifications at Certificate III and below.

## Six Ways to Restore Australia’s Skills and Training System

I end this presentation with six ways to restore Australia’s skills and training system, which will also [enable VET to make Australia a more equal and just society](#):

1. **Create proper pathways**, from ACE to TAFE, and from VET to universities, ensuring that “free TAFE” programs do not distort student choices and provider stability.
2. **Develop regional skills plans**, metropolitan and non-metropolitan, which prioritise social justice goals and consider the needs of disadvantaged learners as a top priority. We need to [avoid skills planning “from 50,000 feet up”](#), because from that height people disappear from view.
3. **Fund foundation skills (FS)** – language, literacy, numeracy, digital and employability skills – properly, [recognising the importance](#) of skilled FS teachers and the special needs of adult basic education students, who may not fit into traditional VET teaching models: this includes national recruitment campaigns utilising the Reading Writing Hotline.
4. **Ensure VET is properly funded** – with [7.0% inflation](#) in Australia in the 12 months to March 2023, VET funding must be heading backwards. ACE providers need resources for proper physical facilities and digital connections.
5. **Implement a national outreach program** to re-engage disadvantaged and vulnerable VET learners who have left training due to natural disasters or COVID-19, building on the Victorian Reconnect Program and the earlier TAFE NSW Outreach program, with a focus on engagement, student support and mentoring.
6. **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](#). We must rectify the situation of too many skills programs without underpinning policy and strategy frameworks.

Figure 1: Per adult real economic growth: Share of growth (%) going to the top 10% and bottom 90%



Source: Author’s calculations based on the World Inequality Database

Picture below: AVETRA Interoperability Panel participants (from R to L): Kira Clarke, AVETRA convenor & Brotherhood of St Laurence; Dr Don Perlgut, CCA; Liam Sloan, Federation University; Jenny Macaffer, Adult Learning Australia; Jenny Dodd, TAFE Directors Australia; & Felix Pirie, ITECA.

