

# Learning about social inclusion from adult students in rural communities

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**Abstract:** This presentation explores the experiences of being included and/or excluded from the social life of their communities for a small number of adult students residing in rural South Australia. Theories about social exclusion suggest that exclusion outcomes are created by multidimensional causes. Social exclusion concepts also indicated that locations with fewer available social opportunities lead to the social exclusion of their inhabitants from the influence and benefits that the majority in society enjoy. Contemporary social inclusion philosophy proposes that the process of becoming included in the life of a community and the benefits that flow from that is not simply the opposite of social exclusion; it is far more than that. The progress of individuals, who are thus excluded towards greater inclusion, relies on them being offered both choices in decisions and, about the structures of decision-making. Social inclusion theorists anticipate that furthering the choices for those who are most excluded, will alter the social structures that contribute to exclusion. The pervasive exclusion of some individuals within communities, and growing disparity between regions has prompted government "social inclusion" initiatives. The initiatives of the Australian government include strategies that emphasise an increase in "social participation" by individuals. Social participation is defined by the social activities of an individual that ensure a measured reward. Government social participation strategies comprise of boosting individual engagement with activities such as education or employment. Within South Australia, adult education to facilitate employment has recently been supported by the government's Skills for All Program. Educational attainment within the rural areas of South Australia tends to be below national average, suggesting that rural inhabitants are in a position to benefit both educationally and socially from the Skills for All Program. However, due to a relatively recent initiation, the social outcomes of the Skills for All Program are relatively unexplored. Adult students living in rural areas are recognised as ideally positioned to inform social inclusion research about the

social benefits offered by education. Their sharing of experiences in semi-structured interviews allowed key themes to be identified. These themes, that are reflected here, include the views of individuals on their socially included activities and the ways in which they find themselves remaining socially excluded. Their accounts throw critical light on both the strengths and limitations of social inclusion approaches reliant on participation in adult education.

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