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Life long education experience at Lingnan University

Ying Po CHEUNG

Chi Ping KWAN

Che Kau LI

Kit Ha TONG

Fat Hing YIP

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**LIFE LONG EDUCATION EXPERIENCE
AT LINGNAN UNIVERSITY**

By

CHEUNG YING PO

KWAN CHI PING

LI CHE KAU

TONG KIT HA

YIP FAT HING

**LIFE LONG EDUCATION EXPERIENCE
AT LINGNAN UNIVERSITY**

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LIFE LONG EDUCATION EXPERIENCE AT LINGNAN UNIVERSITY

**CHEUNG YING PO
KWAN CHI PING
LI CHE KAU
TONG KIT HA
YIP FAT HING**

1. Introduction

Owing to the advancement of medical technology, food availability, improved environment and health conditions, population ageing is a phenomenon that is occurring both globally and locally. In Hong Kong, the elderly population defined as comprising people aged 65 and over, was 653,700 in 1996 (Census & Statistics Department 2005a). By 2006, it will be 839,600 (Census & Statistics Department 2004), representing a net increase of 33%. During the same period (1996—2006), the increase in the old-old group (aged 75 and over) is 59%. In Hong Kong, the decrease in birth rate coupled with an increase in average life expectancy, and availability of nutritional food in tandem with economic growth, are the main reasons behind this demographic change. In 2001, the average life expectancy is 78 years for men and 84 years for women (Census & Statistics Department 2005b). According to past research, ageing in Hong Kong will be a serious challenge as 26% of its population will be elderly by 2031 (Census & Statistics Department 2004).

Among the many challenges of ageing, the concepts of active and productive ageing have been widely accepted and adopted as the way forward to manage issues of population ageing. Based on the resource-based theory, the elderly need resources to continue to participate in society. The resources that are critical for the elderly to engage in active ageing are first, health and secondly, skills and capability which could be enhanced through education.

As far as health is concerned, most of the elderly in Hong Kong have chronic illnesses affecting their health. The five common ones are rheumatism (34.2%), hypertension (32.2%), fracture (17.1%), peptic ulcer (13.5%), and diabetes mellitus (10.7%) (Leung & Lo 1997 cited in Phillips & Yeh 1999). Only 31.8 % elderly consider themselves to be in good physical health while the remaining 68% consider their health to be deteriorating when compared with the past year.

In 1995, of the 601,800 elderly aged 65 years or older (Census & Statistics Department 2005a), 67,000 lived in elderly homes (including care and nursing homes), and 87,000 lived in public housing independently. This number is considered large. This group of elderly generally lacks care and support. After the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, SAR Government formed the Elderly Committee that looks after the welfare of elderly with its emphasis on the role of family and the community. The main argument is that old people should grow old in the community for as long as possible

and family should be the main pillar that provides primary support and care to the elderly.

Recent development saw a comprehensive set of services that caters to the needs of old persons such as providing home assistance to help those frail and disable elderly who are willing to grow old in their community. Out reach teams can provide psychogeriatric counseling, physiotherapy services such as regular visits to those living alone and who are in need of such services.

The second important aspect relates to the social well-being of the elderly. Very often, the elderly feel lonely when their children are grown up, married, and very likely live separately. This transition in life resulting in empty nest often accompanied by sense of loss, loneliness and low self-esteem, can erode the social well-being of the elderly. Social interactions are usually very crucial to overcome such loneliness. In order to facilitate social interaction, active participation in social activities can help to reduce stress and improve self-esteem. One of the avenues to increase participation is through education which in turn could improve the skills and capabilities among older people gearing them towards active ageing and quality of life.

Although the issues of ageing are many, the focus of this paper is to share the experiences of mature students pursuing higher education at Lingnan University. It is hoped that by sharing our experiences at Lingnan, public policy decision-makers could provide the necessary institutional support, in

particular the funding aspect since tuition fees are potentially an obstacle to many who are interested.

2. Life Long Education Experience at Lingnan

Learning is a lifelong process. Defining and restricting learning to formal education during childhood, youth and young adulthood is too narrow in scope and depth. Education should be an activity and goal for the entire lifespan. The components of lifelong education are not completely different from the formal education that one receives when young, but they tend to be more interrelated and interactive in nature. The ultimate goal of life long learning leads to improved quality of life.

Continuing education for the old people is beneficial to both the elderly and the society as a whole. It preserves older persons' physical and cognitive functional ability. Through education they gain knowledge, learn to manage information and adopt technology, in particular information and communication technology, that help to enhance their adaptability and appreciation of life, thus reducing their dependence on family and government support.

At Lingnan, the programme is designed to cater to the needs and abilities of older people. The duration of the associate degree programme in Applied Gerontology is about 4-5 years for a two-year full-time programme. The courses are as follows:

- Health and Illness: An Ageing Perspective
- Social Care for the Elderly in Hong Kong
- Integrated Health Care Training I
- Integrated Health Care Training II
- Introduction to Social Gerontology
- Introduction to Sociology
- Practicum in Gerontology
- Social Statistics
- Welfare and Services for the Elderly in Hong Kong

The programme is geared towards developing a pool of manpower among the elderly who have a good understanding about the issues facing the elderly. The services which could be provided include community health and social services. In addition, the approach adopted at Lingnan aims to build students' ability in interpersonal communication skills, leadership skills and management capability. Upon graduation, they could be trained as professional health workers to meet the demand for health care needs among the elderly of Hong Kong. The students could also be employed as social workers.

We, the elderly students, pursuing a degree in Applied Gerontology at Lingnan University, are active learners through interactive and participative learning. The interactive mode of learning allows the elderly to interact among themselves as well as with the younger students in the campus. An

example of the success of interactive learning, the elderly students participated in a seminar sponsored by Lingnan University SAGE on 17, June, 2004. The elderly students spoke on the subject “Knowledge is strength” and created awareness among the public that elderly can learn and their learning process and outcome will benefit the community. Three legislative councilors attended and addressed the seminar. In another media conference on July 20, 2005, President Chen spoke positively about the elderly associate degree programme that attracted media attention. The experience of elderly students studying at Lingnan received wide coverage on television and print media.

With a goal in life, the elderly no longer feel old and helpless, but rejuvenated with a sense of achievement. With the busy schedule of our course work, we no longer have time to groan and mourn and above all, we have no time to fall sick. Applying Maslow’s hierarchy of motivation, we are certainly at the highest level, pursuing self-actualization. We have a mission in life, i.e., to serve and contribute to society upon graduation so as to improve quality of life.

Li Che Kau: My Dream, My Process Towards Realisation

My life after retirement is characterized by substantial free time in spite of my participation in various activities including volunteering. I have also taken up various courses to learn more about things that interest me. These courses are good as I keep myself occupied but I find that deep inside me, something is missing. I felt that more could be done. I was then looking for more challenges.

While surfing the Internet and looking for technical courses that are suitable, I came across the advertisement about the Associate Degree Programme on Applied Gerontology at Lingnan. It was a “discovery” that sends my thoughts back to my younger days. The hardships in those days (after the Second World War) put many out of school. Leaving school after Form Three has always been a regret in my life. My low education qualification was an obstacle in my career as I have too often missed promotion opportunities because of my educational background. It was an awakening to me that I suddenly realized that I could achieve my dream of receiving formal education at a university and ultimately qualified with a degree.

I went through smoothly with the entrance interview and a test that assessed my ability. I am proud to be accepted. Next, I was uncertain about how to fund the entire study that costs HKD84,000.00. I have my retirement funds but it is still a big sacrifice and an opportunity cost. I finally took the big step to use my retirement fund. I did not look back since.

The programme at Lingnan is good and we, the elderly students are allowed to take a minimum of two courses per semester. We sit in the same lectures as the young undergraduates. This gives us a chance to interact and to understand the younger people better. We have the same reading materials, are required to prepare assignments, presentations and participate in tutorials just like the normal students. In other words, no privileges or concessions are given to us. In the class, we are as young as the other students. Initially, we found it hard to follow the lectures. It is a great challenge but we are also more prepared to put in long hours. With mutual help we are able to overcome all odds and persevere till now. From the initial nine elder students who enrolled, five have left. The four of us have adapted well to the rigour of student life. We enjoy every minute of it.

We pace our study according to our ability. We do not spend the whole day studying. Apart from the classes, group discussions and studying, we exercise, play games and simply enjoy the facilities within the campus. The demanding lifestyle of a university student leaves us with no time to “fall ill”. In fact we are now physically, mentally and emotionally stronger than the days before Lingnan.

3. Government to Facilitate More

For the development of life long education, we would urge the government to formulate a plan of action that could provide some form of financial assistance to interested elderly. The premise upon which the rationale for financing is built is simple “Elderly learn, community benefits”. We have

been advocating and appealing for this support and the time has come for the government to seriously consider introducing a funding programme.

Up till now, the government has kept its support towards elderly education to a minimum. The only funding that the government has provided is for those who are 60 years or over who are excluded in Continue Learning Fund or Employees Retraining Scheme to enroll in some informal short certificate or diploma courses,. It is unfair or unconstitutional to limit the opportunity of the elderly to pursue a university degree.

The only promise that the Government has made is that the government will continue to offer relief services to the aged who are chronically dependent. Most of the current generation of the older persons does not enjoy the retirement benefits of protection. It shows that only 15% of older persons enjoy the retirement benefits in lump sum amounts while very few have a regular monthly payment. Fees amounting to \$84,000 for a three-year Associate Degree course at Lingnan University (not including learning accessories, transportation, meals, other expenditure) is too expensive for an average retired elderly student even though some of them do receive retirement fund. They still consider the tuition fee a burden. The benefits of such funding are obvious from the point of cost savings. The funding can be worked out in such a way that the money spent on funding for continued education can be a net gain for the government and society since the elderly with higher education forms a pool of manpower waiting to be tapped and utilized, and also through better health that reduces medical expenditure.

Therefore, a policy that will set a plan of action that caters to the financial need of elderly education at the university level should be the priority of the government of Hong Kong.

4. The Role of Lingnan University

With the felt need and a lack of funding, our effort is support by the President of Lingnan University (LNU), the Asia Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS) of LNU and The Hong Kong Society for the Aged (SAGE). We met 4 legislative councilors and expressed the plea of subvention for the elderly in university study on April 23, 2004. Our appeal was met with failure as the response given by the government to SAGE stated that due to government financial deficit, the government is unable to grant any financial assistance but promised to seek other assistance. With this rejection, Professor Edward K.Y. Chen recommended that we apply for charitable funding from the Jockey Club, Hong Kong. The Jockey Club has kindly granted a small lump sum amount for a single application.

5. Conclusion

Self actualization needs has become one of the basic needs for human beings. Social welfare services should address to meet different levels of needs of various groups. Nearly 80% of the people aged 60 or above did not attain a secondary level of education. They missed the opportunity to attend school or university when young and they are eager to study at a

university. The elderly who meet the entry requirements at the university level should be given an opportunity instead of being turned away due to lack of financial assistance. Although the government has turned down our request for a funding policy, we believe that a time will come when the government will realize the importance of continued education at the tertiary level as the benefits to society. On our part as students and graduates we believe that we could “move” mountains. We as university students should explore and participate in the movement to call for a policy that will add value to society. We have the confidence to achieve the goal if we strive with unrelenting effort, total commitment and undivided unity among the elderly. We continue to believe that the funding policy is a win-win policy move as ultimately, it will save the taxpayers’ money and government resources.

We would like to end with our motto:

“Elderly learn, community benefits”

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Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS) at Lingnan University

HISTORY

The Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS) was established as a University-wide institute in 1998 and has been operating as one of the research centers in the Institute of Humanities and Social Science (IHSS) since September 2001. The mission of APIAS is to facilitate and develop research in gerontology and issues related to population ageing in Hong Kong and the Asia-Pacific region.

OUR MISSION

“To develop a better environment for older people and their families in Hong Kong and the Asia-Pacific region.”

OUR OBJECTIVES

- To develop an area of research excellence in programme evaluation and action research; both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.
- To strengthen our collaboration within the Lingnan University and the local communities, particularly in relation to student learning.
- To strengthen the collaboration and network amongst the Asia-Pacific region.

For further information on APIAS and opportunities for research collaboration and affiliations with the Centre, please contact us :

Lingnan University
Tuen Mun, Hong Kong

ISBN: 978-988-17854-5-9

Tel: (+852) 2616-7425

Email: apias@ln.edu.hk

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