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Life-long learning among the elderly in Hong Kong : the experience of Caritas Evergreen College, Hong Kong

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Lo, S. C. S. (2010). Life-long learning among the elderly in Hong Kon: The experience of Caritas Evergreen College, Hong Kong (APIAS Monograph Paper Series No.19). Retrieved from Lingnan University website: <http://commons.ln.edu.hk/apiasmp/19>

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MONOGRAPH SERIES No.19 (June 2010)

**LIFE-LONG LEARNING AMONG THE ELDERLY IN HONG
KONG: THE EXPERIENCE OF CARITAS EVERGREEN
COLLEGE, HONG KONG**

By

LO SIU CHING, SELINA

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**LIFE-LONG LEARNING AMONG THE ELDERLY IN HONG
KONG: THE EXPERIENCE OF CARITAS EVERGREEN
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LO SIU CHING, SELINA

1. Introduction

The dynamism in the society we live today has demanded a new approach to life in the dawn of a knowledge society which permeates the entire globe including Hong Kong. The knowledge society has been driven by the advancement in the information communication technology (ICT) in particular which demands new skills and hence is seen as an obstacle to the elderly even in their daily living functions. At the most basic level of daily life, many products including television and washing machines are today computer-aided or chip-based that requires some minimum knowledge about “buttons” and simple operations in order to be able to use these gadgets. The elderly who grew up without the benefit of learning about the ICT and related technology are in a disadvantaged position. Hence, to benefit from such developments, the elderly will need to adopt a positive attitude towards learning and about their own capability. In other words, a whole new socialization process needs to be put in place for the elderly so that they are not marginalized in the knowledge-based economy.

The learning focuses have changed over the years. The UNESCO in 1996 concurred that education systems of the world are confronted with four

major issues: (1) learning to know, (2) learning to live together, (3) learning to be, and (4) learning to do (UNESCO, 1996). These four major issues are particularly relevant to the elderly under the concept of life-long learning. Education is regarded as an ongoing process of improving knowledge and skills. It is also primarily an exceptional means of bringing about personal development and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations (UNESCO).

In adopting the concept of life-long learning, certain adaptations are necessary on the part of the elderly. First, the elderly will need to reappraise their role after retirement. Retirement role is not synonymous with inactivity or a passive role but rather a leisure role that allows them to explore their abilities, interests and contribution to society. In redefining their new role, they may need to adopt a new attitude towards retirement so that with the new found purpose in life, they are able to embark on the journey of another phase in life. The longer life expectancy that is enjoyed today means that people still have many more years after retirement. From their 50s to their 70s, there is a wide pool of untapped human resource, experiences and capacities that remain to be explored, re-developed and to be further utilized. The elders have to explore their “new” life, re-establish relationships, develop their physical and artistic capacities, and renew their contributions to society. Re-definition of self encapsulates the following tenets:

Re-exploring life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - re-define self due to the transition from work role to leisure role - re-assess priorities and re-develop relationships as family matures over time, - re-explore the meaning of life and search for new sources of self-respect
Re-develop physical and artistic capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to develop self-assurance and locus of control - to utilize leisure time fruitfully for the pursuit of interests - to maintain physical health and social linkages
Renew social contributions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to look for ways to contribute to society, or even new employment opportunities

2. The Establishment and Framework of Caritas Evergreen College

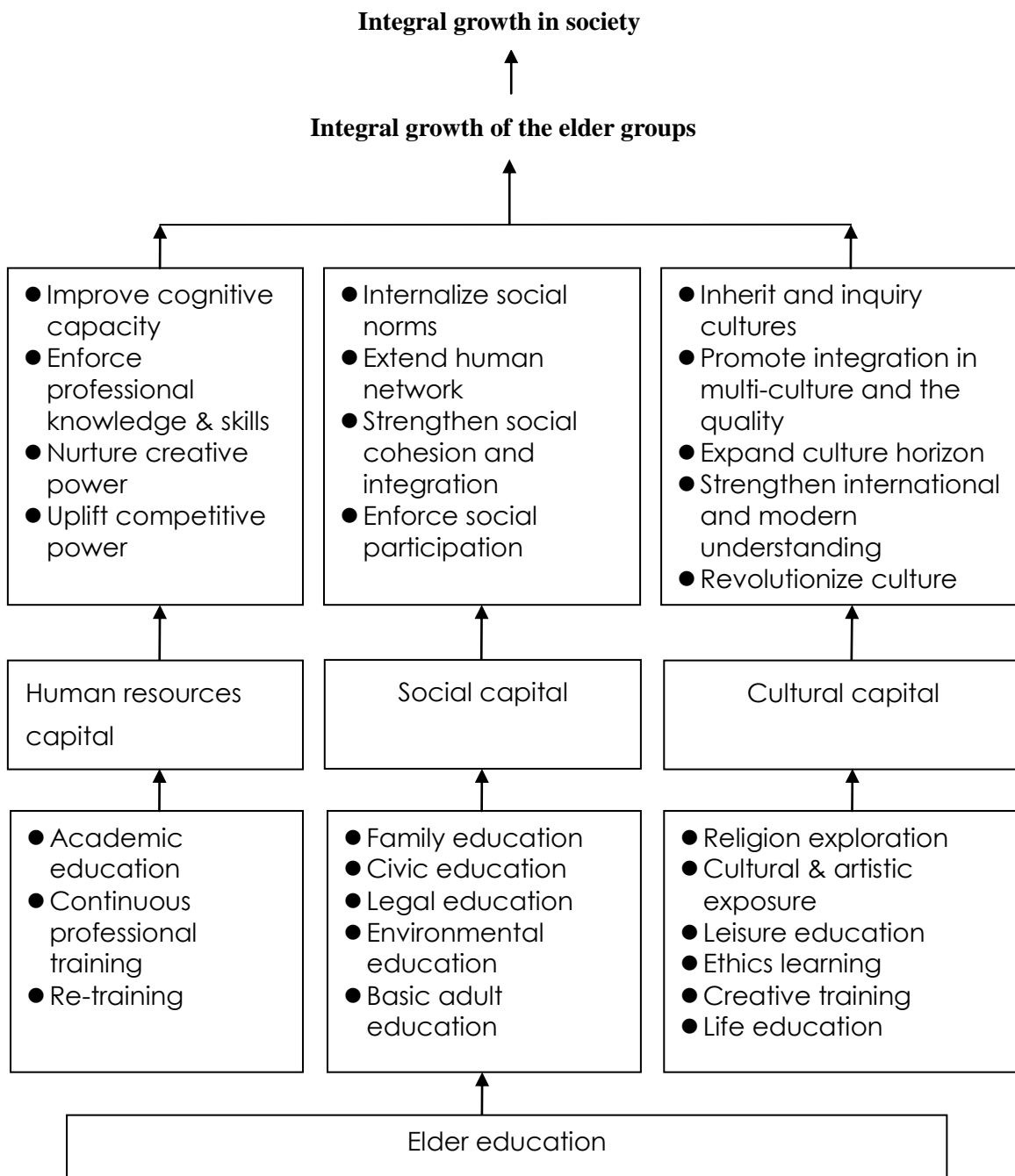
Caritas – Hong Kong, established in 1953, is a multi-service social welfare organization serving the Hong Kong community. In response to the increasing service needs for elder learning and better resource utilization, a project known as Caritas Evergreen College was jointly organized by Caritas Services for the Elderly and Caritas Adult and Higher Education Services since September 2003. The overall aim of elder education is to provide education and skills training for the elderly through an integrated approach. The College serves not simply as an educator, but also an integrator, coordinator, service provider, promoter and innovator. The

functions of the College include conducting classes, organizing and coordinating activities, and in the process help the elderly achieve higher level of goals such as self-actualization. For example, the aim in organizing leisure activities is not restricted to provide entertainment, but to enable the elderly to achieve a higher level of cultural self-fulfillment and others. Likewise, for physical education, the purpose is not purely for personal health but it also involves caring for others. Some of the courses provided are designed to enable the elderly to learn new skills that eventually will lead to new employment opportunities. The ultimate aim of these efforts is to enable the elderly to continue to serve the community and contribute to the economic development of Hong Kong. Indeed, the continuous education of the elders under the concept of life-long learning serves to develop human resources capital, social capital, cultural capital and finally the integral growth of the elder population and the society at large.

Figure 1 shows the significance of elder education for the development of a learning society (Tsai & Chang, 2004). In view of the recency in the introduction of the concept of life-long learning as well as the financial and infrastructural constraints, development programmes for the elderly tend to be concentrated in the areas of social and cultural activities that are designed to build and improve social and cultural capital. The importance of these two areas of development cannot be underestimated. With the increasing number of elderly, projected to be one in four of the population by 2031 (Census and Statistics Department, 2004), the demand for such

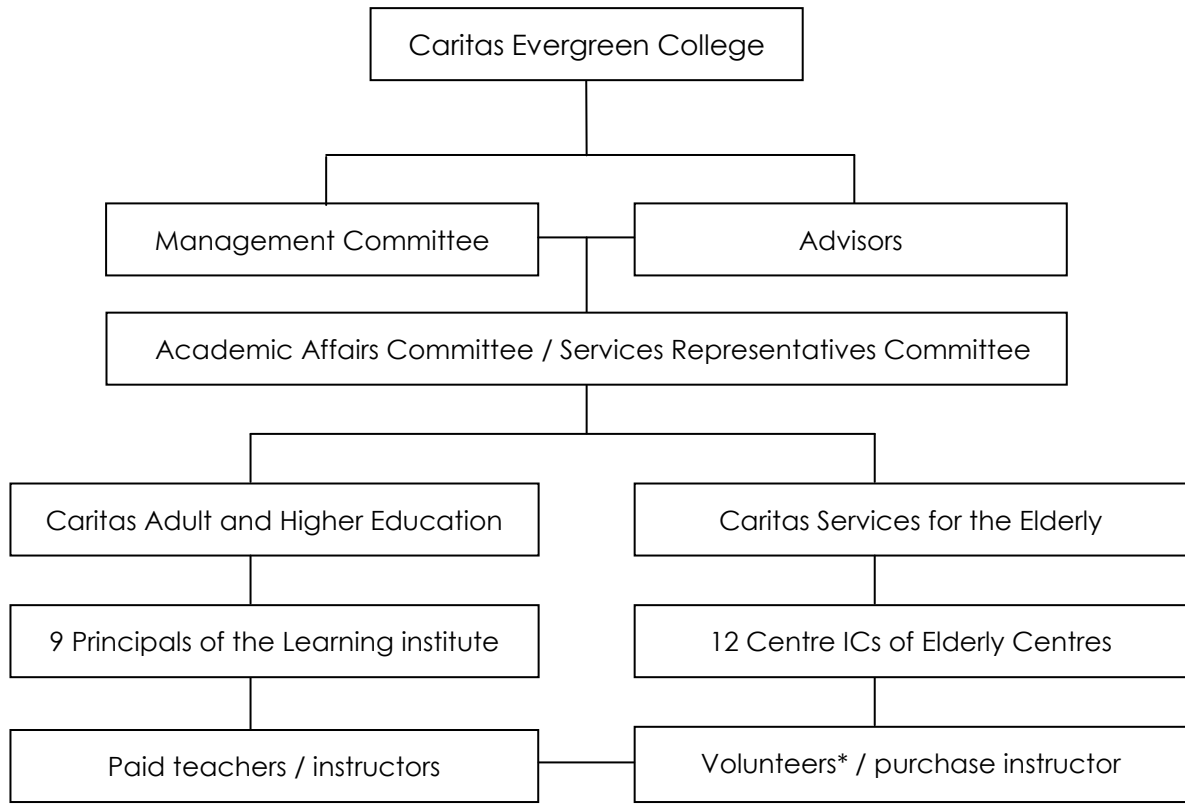
services/programmes is expected to increase. The present pool of elderly will become useful in nurturing the future cohort of elderly in social and cultural activities, thereby contributing towards development.

Figure 1: The Significance of Elder Education in Developing a Learning Society



Source: Chang (2004)

Figure 2: Structure of Caritas Evergreen College



*the elders act as volunteer teachers with allowances given to them.

Source: Chang (2004)

Teachers' Training

Most of the teachers in the College are elders who had no previous formal training in teaching. Yet, it is believed that the elder teachers may be the best age group to teach the elder students due to their better understanding about the needs, ability in learning, and concerns of elder students which could compensate for the lack of formal training in teaching. In addition, engaging these elder teachers is a good way to utilize valuable human resource capital.

The College also emphasizes the training of teachers. Every year, retraining sessions, known as “re-fuel stations”, using the format of seminars and small group discussions are organized for the teachers so that they can learn and share their experiences in teaching elderly students. In addition, new theories are introduced during these training sessions so that the teachers are exposed to the psychology of elders, the theories of adult learning and education, learning motivations and behavior, teaching strategies and assessment, role of elder teachers and significance of elder education and so on. The framework of “re-fuel station” is in fact modeled after the certificate course for the professional teaching in adult education organized by Caritas Adult and Higher Education Services.

Workers' Training

In the operation of the College, social workers also serve very important functions in designing new courses and co-coordinating daily functions such as recruitment of new teachers and academic assistants. In order to facilitate the implementation of these activities, a worker exchange platform was formed and training is provided on a on-going basis. Manuals on administration and operation were put in place. Worker exchange platform emphasizes creative thinking and courses development.

Educational Programmes at Caritas Evergreen College

The College conducts courses in four disciplines: social sciences, health and exercise arts and language, and modern life and technology. In designing the courses, the unique characteristics of the courses are the major selling points of Caritas that differentiate the programmes from others that are available in Hong Kong. The courses are interdisciplinary and pluralistic in nature while the syllabus is multi-level. Active learning is the major approach. Caritas provides continuous service and older adults also benefit from the Hong Kong-wide learning spots, making accessibility hassle-free.

The courses offered under each of the disciplines are as follows:

1. *Social Science* is to meet the needs of re-exploration of life, as it focuses on the aspect of learning to know and learning to live together. It consists of courses such as Life and Religion, Psychology, New Role training, tailored for males who may take on the role as carer, leadership training, environmental issues, and current affairs.
2. *Health and Exercise* are designed to meet physical needs and to enhance health-related knowledge, as they focus on the aspect of learning to be. Courses offered are: Health and Disease, Nutrition, First Aid, and Sports and Exercise.

3. *Arts and Language* is to meet artistic needs and centers on the aspect of learning to be. Courses include Music, Drawings, Dancing, Chinese and English Language.
4. *Modern Life and Technology* is to meet the needs of re-development. Courses focus on the aspects of learning to do. Computer Studies, Photography, Cosmetics, Modern Cooking, Housing Repairs and Maintenance are some of the courses offered to re-train the elderly to function in the modern society where technical knowledge is fundamental to living.

In addition to the classes conducted at Caritas, exchange tour was organized for both students and teachers. An example of such a tour was to Macau Polytechnic Institute that has an Elder College that provides formal education to the elderly. They enjoyed the tour and valued the exposure they gained. Most importantly, seeing that the elderly in Macau learn together with young people is indirectly an encouragement and puts hope to the elder students from Caritas.

Besides learning in classes, the students at Caritas are given the opportunity to participate in various activities: conductor training, singing and health exercise classes.

Table 1: Statistics of Courses Conducted in 2003 – 2005

Curriculum	First Semester 2003		Second Semester		Third Semester		First Semester 2004		Second Semester		Third Semester		First Semester 2005		Second Semester		Third Semester		Total S/E Adu Edu		TOTAL
	S/E	Adu Edu	S/E	Adu Edu	S/E	Adu Edu	S/E	Adu Edu	S/E	Adu Edu	S/E	Adu Edu	S/E	Adu Edu	S/E	Adu Edu	S/E	Adu Edu	S/E	Adu Edu	
Social Science	12	0	10	1	8	2	13	4	13	3	6	2	10	4	10	3	5	5	87	24	111
Health & Exercise	25	1	20	0	21	0	21	0	22	0	14	0	18	0	14	0	20	0	175	1	176
Arts & Language	81	45	78	58	89	55	101	60	100	56	39	55	99	60	105	56	102	66	794	511	1305
Modern Life & Technology	15	5	19	14	23	12	17	11	19	8	22	12	20	11	30	8	32	14	197	95	292
Sub-total	133	51	127	73	141	69	152	75	154	67	81	69	147	75	159	67	159	85	1253	631	1884
Total	184		200		210		227		221		150		222		226		244		1884		

*S/E = Caritas Services for the Elderly; Adu Edu = Caritas Adult and Higher Education

Award System

Caritas Evergreen College maintains a flexible award system in which four levels of award are put in place: Certificate, Advanced Certificate, Diploma, and Higher Diploma, with different minimum requirement for credit hours ranging from 100 to 600 learning hours per year.

Table 2: Award System and Credits Requirements

Award System	Certificate	Advanced Certificate	Diploma	Higher Diploma
Credits Required	100	200	400	600
Credits Mix				
Foundation Course	No specific requirements		Max 200 Credits	Max 200 Credits
Advanced Courses	No specific requirements		Min 200 credits	No specific requirements
Tertiary Courses	No specific requirements			Min 200 credits

3. Conclusion

The year 2005 marked the first milestone for the college as the first batch of students attended their graduation at the College. Among the graduates, around 400 of them were awarded Certificate, and 200 with Advanced Certificate. Among the 3000 students in the College, the age range is from 55 to over 90. From the feedback of participants, it is noted that the project can help to satisfy different needs of the elderly, especially in their need for self-development that allows them to continue to contribute to society.

Although the College was only two years old by 2005 it had already held around 2000 courses. It is still premature to assess our achievement, yet we strongly believe that age is not an obstacle to learning, and we affirm that continue education can raise the quality of life of the elders, so that they can maintain a healthy body and mind, expand their horizons in a knowledge society. In addition, they should also develop the capability to adapt to changes that are taking place in society.

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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 :

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Postage and administrative cost \$20