

LIFELONG LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ELDERLY IN MALAYSIA: PRESENT AND FUTURE

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Population ageing is one of the current global challenges. The United Nations Population Division (released at the end of February 2002), among its conclusions, highlighted that by 2050 the trend towards an ever elder population will affect every continent, not only developed countries. For example, this division estimated that the proportion of elder population is more than double from 10 percent to 22 percent globally. In addition, the number of persons aged 60 years or over will triple in 45 years' time, charting a rise from the 672 million in 2005 to more than 2 billion by 2050. The statistical data on the observed and forecasted percentages of the elder population in selected areas, regions, and countries of the world for 1950, 2000 and 2050 is shown in Figure 1. Although the ageing population is not growing as fast as in other neighbouring Asian countries, Malaysia cannot be shielded from having to face similar issues and challenges. According to the 2000 Census, by 2020, 9.5 percent of Malaysia's population will be aged 60 or over, which would be roughly 3 million of its population (Gavrilov and Heuveline, 2003). Therefore, it is imperative that measures must be taken to ensure that the elderly will lead quality and productive lives either through formal, informal or non-formal lifelong learning.

Figure1 Observed and Forecasted Percentages of the Elderly in Selected Areas, Regions, and Countries of the World: 1950, 2000 and 2050

Major Area, region and country	1950	2000	2050
World	5.2%	6.9%	19.3%
Africa	3.2%	3.3%	6.9%
Latin America and the Caribbean	3.7%	5.4%	16.9%
China	4.5%	6.9%	22.7%
India	3.3%	5.0%	14.8%
Japan	4.9%	17.2%	36.4%
Europe	8.2%	14.7%	29.2%
Italy	8.3%	18.1%	35.9%
Germany	9.7%	16.4%	31.0%
Sweden	10.3%	17.4%	30.4%
U.S.A.	8.3%	12.3%	21.1%

Source: United Nations 2001

OBJECTIVE: The purpose of this paper is to explore the present lifelong learning activities and opportunities for the elderly in Malaysia and to discuss briefly the issues related to financial aspects and demography to support such activities.

METHOD: This paper used the secondary data sources on Malaysian lifelong learning activities and opportunities; and its elder population.

DISCUSSION: At present, there are continuous efforts taken by the Malaysian government to improve the elder populations' quality of life. To transform the Malaysian society into a value-based knowledge society by the year 2020, the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (MRRD) through the National Information Technology Agenda which was launched in 1996 by the National Information Technology Council has become the lead agency to provide lifelong learning activities and opportunities for elder population particularly those who are in the rural communities. One of the main activities is the computer literacy activities. These activities were developed to increase the information and communication technology knowledge of elderly and were organized by the Institute for Rural Advancement (INFRA) and the Division of Community Development or KEMAS (Mazanah and Mazalan, 2002; UNESCO, 2002).

Besides the MRRD, the Institute of Gerontology Universiti Putra Malaysia supported by the government and the United Nations Population Fund is also providing lifelong learning activities and opportunities for the elderly through the "Lifelong Learning Initiative for the Elderly" programme. This programme aims to promote active and productive older Malaysians by introducing lifelong activities that facilitate the sharing of life experiences, building knowledge and gaining new skills in later life (The Institute of Gerontology, 2010). Although there are many continuous efforts taken by the government to improve the elder populations' well-being, based on the projection of ageing population between 2000 and 2050, the number of elderly involved is still limited. The results from previous studies showed that the elder populations in Malaysia mostly spend their time in a day as follows: 77.4 percent for napping; 45 percent for relaxing; and 40.9 percent for housework (Sharifah Norazizan and Aizan, 2007). Hamid and Yahaya (2008) also found similar results. Yin-Fah et. al (2010) revealed that majority of the sampled elder employees stopped their jobs at the age 55 and they were not looking for a new one because of health status and family responsibilities. Therefore, to move forward in preparing active and productive ageing populations, the government needs to ensure that lifelong learning activities and opportunities are sufficient to fulfill the needs of the elder population by the year 2020 or 2050.

Additionally, several issues and challenges need to be addressed as well as to ensure the lifelong learning agenda will be successfully implemented. In the recent speech by the Minister of Higher Education (MoHE), Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin, he stressed on one of the seven thrusts in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) 2007-2010, the lifelong learning which is signified by the non-formal and informal education. In this context, amongst the major issues and challenges are lack of awareness and participation; lack of information on financial assistance and lack of information on the availability of activities and programmes (MoHE, 2010). In addressing the issues and challenges, the government and non-governmental organizations such as the Institute of Gerontology, Community Colleges, INFRA, KEMAS, Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Open University Malaysia (OUM) and Wawasan Open University have initiated creative and innovative solutions.

The MCA for example, started the lifelong learning campaigns since the year of 2004. Under its Community Education Development Bureau, MCA conducts various activities and programmes solely for the elderly community. Activities selected to be conducted are based on the skills required at the present time such as English language classes, basic computer skills classes, Mandarin language classes, and health classes. Short courses are also available and have shown good responses such as typing of Chinese characters correctly for text messaging and English courses for taxi drivers. To increase participation and promote such activities and programmes, MCA conducts its awareness activities through "talks" and activities in community learning centres and in the shopping mall as a place that converges people from all walks of life (MCA, 2010).

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and OUM organized a jointly project entitled “Capitalising Information Technology for Greater Equity and Access among Poor and Rural Communities”. This project involved seven other countries namely Indonesia, Taiwan, Thailand, China, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea and Japan and aimed to narrow the digital gap by educating the elderly, poor and rural the knowledge and skills in computers and the Internet so that they would be at ease with technology thus become skillful in their respective areas (Kaur, et. al, 2009). Although the pilot project targeted predominantly women, it is proposed that similar kind of programmes be conducted and extended to both elderly men and women as to provide them the skills and knowledge to access information and data resources related to upgrade their total well-being and therefore be economically active. Since the training materials created, “ICT Manuals for Trainers”, are readily available for trainers, institutions can utilise them to provide the necessary and relevant training to the interested elderly.

Recently, MoHE and related ministries and agencies initiated three laboratories aimed to identify and propose innovative and creative lifelong learning activities and opportunities for Malaysian population based on the NHESP’s four strategies (MoHE, 2007):

- To upgrade mechanisms and infrastructure to facilitate lifelong learning;
- To enhance public awareness and involvement in lifelong learning;
- To ensure the continuity and appreciation of lifelong learning; and
- To provide adequate financial support to inculcate lifelong learning as a way of life.

Among the activities and opportunities identified and proposed are Flexi Lifelong Learning for All, Productivity Gain Programme, MyLLL, Hop-on-the-LLL Train, LLL for Everyone, LLL Savings Fund, LLL Tax Incentives, and My LLL Grants (MoHE, 2010). It is expected that through these innovative and creative lifelong learning activities and opportunities, the country can upgrade and improve not only the well-being of adults but also the elderly in later life.

CONCLUSION: As the conclusion, to ensure successful implementation of the proposed lifelong learning activities and opportunities, it is imperative that the objectives are clearly established. All planned activities should focus and be designed based on several important factors such as: the needs, interest and inclination of the elderly; awareness that lifelong learning is important in making oneself relevant, and enlighten on the attainable benefits in engaging in lifelong learning. Malaysia needs to establish systems which can raise awareness of the benefits of lifelong learning and this can be summarized into three main perspectives which are economic, personal development and sense of self-worth and happiness. In other words, we need to deliver a powerful message to our ageing population on the significance of lifelong learning and more importantly that, *learning does matter, regardless of age.*

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