

# Back to the campus: Implications of an intensive lifelong experience for wellness among older learners in a university setting

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Vincent Lee, Emma Liu, Gary Wai & Yongxin Ruan  
Department of Applied Social Sciences,  
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University  
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# Study background – The benefits of lifelong learning

- Lifelong learning has been found to be beneficial in helping people, particularly older adults
- Health-related benefits:
  - Physical
    - Keeping brains active
  - Mental
    - Enhancing resilience from challenges
    - Maintaining a sense of self-control
    - Boosting self-confidence
  - Social
    - Extending social network; make new friends

- ▶ Hong Kong's unique socioeconomic background
  - Many older people did not have the opportunity to take part in higher education when they were young
    - Hong Kong had been a labor-intensive and developing society
  - Busy work lives and long working hours are the typical barriers
  - Learning experiences in a university campus could be their long-term wish and a special experience for them

# Overview of MiniU

- ▶ In the past 12 years, the Institute of Active Ageing (IAA) of PolyU had conducted a summer Mini-U every year
- ▶ It makes good use of the university resources in the summer break and providing an experience of university life for people who are aged 50 and above
- ▶ A 2-week programme with 10 days of classes on a variety of practical and leisure subjects
  - ▶ There are also experiential learning activities
- ▶ There are three sessions per day: Language class, academic classes, and hands-on activities
- ▶ Hostel stay
- ▶ A formal graduation ceremony
- ▶ Around 60 older adults participated each year since 2008

# Research objectives

- ▶ To examine whether the expectations of the participants have been fulfilled, and how they have been fulfilled
- ▶ To understand the challenges of the participants in learning and participating in the programme events
- ▶ To understand how lifelong learning facilitates the enhancement of knowledge and social life of the participants
- ▶ To examine the impact of lifelong learning on the health and wellbeing of the participants, both physically and mentally

# Research Methods

- ▶ Individual in-depth interviews
- ▶ Pre and post-tests
  
- ▶ Sampling
  - ▶ 2017: Purposive sampling, through email and telephone invitations by IAA
  - ▶ 2018: Random sampling, through email and telephone invitations by IAA
  
- ▶ Data analyses
  - ▶ Coding
  - ▶ Thematic analyses
  - ▶ Comparative studies

# Sample

	2017	2018
Male	2	5
Female	16	9
Total	<b>18</b>	<b>14</b>

# Findings

## 1. The expectations of the participants have been fulfilled, and how?

- ▶ Half of the 2017 informants expressed enjoyment of the programme because it served as a kind of university experience to them
  - ▶ Experienced the graduation ceremony, one-night hostel life, and learning within campus
  - ▶ They felt satisfied: Finally got a chance to study at university when they were young
- ▶ Almost all participants of the MiniU 2018 expressed their concerns about their physical and mental health
  - ▶ They reported that the MiniU programme was practical and useful for them. Learning health-related knowledge helped them improve their health condition and solve their problems
- ▶ A number of 2017/18 participants expressed that participating in MiniU could encourage them to embrace more positive emotions
  - ▶ E.g. happiness, sense of purpose, satisfaction, and self-fulfilment, as well as motivate them to live
  - ▶ Helped to reduce negative emotions, such as depression and loneliness

*When a woman married without wearing bridal gown or Chinese wedding gown, she would hope to have a taste of wearing them... Similarly, taking part in this program seems like fulfilling my wish of going to university.*

- Participant of Mini U 2017

*... I felt happy throughout the program. As I told you last time, I only wished to experience university life at the beginning. But at the end, I have gained more than I expected. I have learnt a lot of new things...*

- Participant of Mini U 2017



# Findings

## 2. The challenges of the participants in learning and participating in the programme events

- Poor memory: Almost all informants believed that they had poor memories which made it hard for them to follow and remember what was taught in the programme
- Most informants believed that lifelong learning could be considered as a stimulation of their brains and a way to help them improve their memory and mental health
- Financial concerns:
  - 5 participants mentioned that their healthcare expenditure would be reduced due to the improvement of their health condition with better understanding of health
  - 3 participants suggested that the government should play an important role to support older people to join continuing education courses

*I think the government should allocate more resources to support the older adults in pursuing lifelong learning, as it is beneficial to both the older adults and the government. I believe that pursuing lifelong learning is good for the health of older adults. If their health were improved, hospitalization for them would be reduced, alleviating the burden of healthcare of the government.*

- Participant of Mini U 2018

# Findings

## 3. Lifelong learning benefits the enhancement of knowledge and social life of the participants, and how?

- ▶ 7 out of 13 participants in 2018 stated that their relationships with children got improved because they got more topics to share with their children
  - ▶ Helped them reconnect with their children
- ▶ Some participants believed that their relationship with other family members had improved because they spent less time at home (fewer conflicts with family) and could apply health-related knowledge to their family members
- ▶ All participants believed that their interpersonal relationships got improved because they had more topics to share with their old friends
- ▶ Expanded social network via the programme and the one-night stay at the student hostel

*If older adults stay at home all the time, conflicts will easily occur between them and their family members, thus affecting their relationships. On the contrary, if they actively participate in lifelong learning activities, their family relationships would be better, as they will not stay at home all the time. It is not necessarily good to spend all of your time with your family. In contrast, it is more important that your family members will stand by you when needed.*

- Participant of Mini U 2018

# Findings

## 4. The impact of lifelong learning on the health and wellbeing of the participants, both physically and mentally

- ▶ Participants mentioned about some courses were very practical and could be applied to themselves and the people around them
  - ▶ Including courses on foot health, physiotherapy, marriage and family relations
- ▶ Participants stated that lectures motivated them to join more outdoor activities
  - ▶ Help them maintain physical and mental health and keep in touch with other people in the future.

*My family members can benefit from the course too. For example, when I learned new health-related knowledge, I will share it with my family members. After the sharing, it may of some use to them.*

**- Participant of Mini U 2018**

# Implications

- ▶ The unique setting and learning environment in a university provides the participants with an invaluable opportunity to learn in a tertiary institution
- ▶ Co-sharing of university spaces is a creative approach to motivate older learners to be more active and healthy in terms of extended social network and stimulation of their cognitive ability
- ▶ Lifelong learning should be encouraged to support older adults in social integration, family relationships, physical and mental health
- ▶ The future lifelong learning programmes should focus on the elements that could enhance the social lives, health and wellbeing of the older adults
  - ▶ More financial resources should be available to take part in lifelong learning

# References

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**Thank you!**