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Older Persons and Intergenerational Solidarity

Hong Kong's approach to
lifelong learning across generations

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The aim of this paper is to share and analyse the Hong Kong experience of promoting lifelong learning across generations to result in intergenerational solidarity by way of building a network of 'elder academies' through cross-sectoral collaboration.

Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of China, located on the southern coast of the country. It is a major financial and cultural hub in Asia. Hong Kong has a total population of 7.41 million in 2021 (Population Census, 2021). In recent decades, the population has shown an increasing trend of ageing. The proportion of older persons aged 65 and over in the total population rose from 13% in 2011 to 20% in 2021. It is projected to be as high as 36.6% by 2066. The median age of the population increased from 41.7 in 2011 to 46.3 in 2021, also reflecting the ageing trend. In fact, the lifespan in Hong Kong's population has been steadily increasing over the years due to various factors such as improvements in healthcare, living standards, and advancements in medical technology. Hong Kong men and women live an average 82.9 years and 88 years respectively in 2020, topping the world in terms of life expectancy. As a result, Hong Kong is facing the challenge created by a fast-ageing population, requiring the government to put in place policies and strategies to foster active ageing, where lifelong learning is believed to play a vital role in promoting the quality of later life.

In Hong Kong, learning for older adults first emerged in the late 1980s where non-government organisations (NGOs) played an active role in initiating and organising lifelong learning programmes and activities for older persons at the local community level (Leung, Lui, & Chi, 2006). Most of these non-formal learning opportunities are addressing the leisure and practical needs of older adults. This period of older adult learning was characterised by a non-formal approach with little government involvement. This has remained unchanged until the establishment of the Elderly Commission (EC) of Hong Kong in 1997, whose mandate is to advise the government on policies and issues related to the growing ageing population in Hong Kong.

Lifelong learning, among a host of other pressing ageing issues such as ageing welfare, housing, medical and health care, falls under the auspices of the EC. The EC is aware of the benefits of lifelong learning to active and healthy ageing and has therefore advised the

government since 1997 to adopt a more coordinated and active approach to the promotion of lifelong learning among older adults to help them enhance quality of life as they age. Tam (2012) has delineated the development of elder learning in Hong Kong in two distinct stages.

The first stage referred to the pre-1997 period before the Elderly Commission (EC) was set up and where learning for older persons was mainly non-formal in nature and offered by individual social service agencies at the local community level. The second stage referred to the post-1997 period where the founding of the EC has changed the landscape of elder learning development in Hong Kong. Such water-shed development in policies and provisions for elder learning is coincidentally marked by the retrocession of Hong Kong from the British government to PRC China, and the establishment of the Hong Kong Elderly Commission in 1997. Since then, lifelong learning for older persons is promoted and encouraged by the government through social campaigns, projects, and limited support to providers. And the approach is a more coordinated one underpinned by policies and directives from the EC.

The EC has been active in crafting policies and plans on numerous fronts since its establishment after 1997. With respect to lifelong learning for older persons, one most notable policy initiative by the Commission is the establishment of the Elder Academy Scheme jointly with the government's Labour and Welfare Bureau in 2007. The aim of the Scheme is to coordinate efforts and provisions of lifelong learning for older adults in Hong Kong under the collective banner of the Elder Academy Scheme. By joining the scheme, providers from any sector will receive seed funding to set up an Elder Academy forming a network of academies across all 18 districts in Hong Kong. As stated on the Elder Academy website (2023), the initial plan was to set up elder academies mainly in primary and secondary schools. In due course, the network was expanded to include tertiary institutions with different providers catering to a variety of learning needs and involving learners from across generations. The network was initially made up of 78 elder academies established in primary and secondary schools. To date, the number has grown to about 190 in primary, secondary, and post-secondary institutions throughout the territory.

Through the EA scheme, the government has been proactive in supporting intergenerational learning, which links the old and young together through a series of purposive interactions with reciprocal benefits (So & Shek, 2011). By way of the EA scheme, schools, primary and secondary, are encouraged to partner with local NGOs to offer programmes and courses that can make good use of the school campuses (after school hours) and the participation of school students (as tutors and learners) for the promotion of intergenerational learning. To be members of the network, an Elder Academy is required to comply with the following objectives (Elder Academy, 2023):

1. To promote lifelong learning

Learning is essential for achieving a fulfilled life. The establishment of elder academies helps to promote the message of continuous learning and encourage elders to make good use of their time and to keep pace with the times through acquiring new knowledge and learning new skills.

2. To maintain healthy physical and mental well-being

Elders who attend elder academies can lead a healthy and fulfilled life. Through learning, they can identify new objectives in life and enhance their sense of achievement and self-confidence in dealing with the changes in daily life.

3. To help foster a sense of worthiness in elders

The elder academies will offer a platform for elders to share their knowledge, demonstrate creativity, serve the community, and continue to make contributions to society.

4. To optimise existing resources

The setting up of elder academies can optimise the use of existing resources of schools in various districts. Schools are generally equipped with the resources and facilities (including students, teachers, alumni, retired teachers, parents' association, halls, and special facilities such as computer room and library, etc.) required for learning. If schools offer their campuses for elder academies to hold courses after school hours (e.g., between 4:00 and 6:00 p.m. during weekdays and at weekends), the administrative cost for running elder learning programmes can be kept to a minimum.

5. To promote harmony (solidarity) between the elders and the young

Young students may enhance communication with the elders through participating in activities of the elder academies. This will not only expand the social network of the elders and young students, but also promote intergenerational harmony and trust (solidarity).

6. To strengthen civic education

School students (especially the uniformed groups such as the Scout Association and the Red Cross or groups for other extra-curricular activities) may offer volunteer services to the elders on school campuses. This may in turn promote civic education and foster a community spirit among the students.

7. To promote cross-sectoral harmony through collaboration

Collaboration with school stakeholders, post-secondary institutions, welfare organisations, and parent-teacher associations, is crucial to the implementation of the Elder Academy Scheme. The establishment of elder academies will help to strengthen ties between schools and the local community.

Two years later, in 2009 the Hong Kong government established the Elder Academy Development Foundation under the auspices of the Elderly Commission with an aim to further support lifelong learning for its older citizens. The Foundation provides funding for projects, programmes and activities that promote continued learning for older persons to keep pace with the times, to stay active physically and mentally, and to contribute to society. Most of the courses run by elder academies at the school and community levels are informal in terms of both content and mode of study. Courses are mainly for personal interest and development, with participation being mostly on a part-time status and voluntary condition. Elder academies are also established in universities or tertiary institutions, though they are study programmes mostly linked to some university classes. Opportunities are provided for older adults to enrol in university courses as auditing students, who do not take part in any assessment, and neither will earn credits towards a degree qualification. As to the curricula, there is a wide range of offerings from elder academies at various levels to meet the different needs, interests, and abilities of older persons. The aim is to help raise their quality of life and capability of adjusting better to ageing. To this end, a wide range of learning opportunities are made available, which include both academic learning and leisurely pursuits such as art and crafts, physical activities like dancing and sports. There are usually no admission

requirements or examinations for assessment. The whole idea is to encourage active ageing through active learning, which should be made barrier-free and stress-free for older learners.

This approach of lifelong learning for older adults in the form of a network of elder academies is claimed to be unique with Hong Kong characteristics (Elder Academy, 2023). There are at least two distinct features that set the Elder Academy Network apart from other approaches to the organisation of elder learning in other parts of the world (Tam, 2019).

1. It adopts a cross-sectoral, collaborative approach where the government plays a coordinating and supporting role to encourage providers from various sectors to offer, jointly or separately, learning opportunities that cater to the various learning needs of older adults. The network is characterised by the co-investment and joint engagement between the government and the various stakeholders. Together they form a network comprising schools (primary and secondary), universities and non-government organisations, whilst also providing a myriad of offerings at different levels that cater to the wide-ranging interests and capabilities of older adults. The government plays a very important role in the network by providing clear and effective coordination of efforts, interactions, and cooperation across elder academies in Hong Kong. It is certainly the cross-sectoral linkages and the network of a wide range of providers that have made the Elder Academy Network a unique model.
2. Another distinct feature of the Elder Academy Scheme is its emphasis on intergenerational learning and solidarity. With its origins first started in schools, the Scheme's focus is to promote intergenerational interactions between older persons and school children, linking the older and younger generations through a series of purposive interactions with reciprocal benefits (So & Shek, 2011). Very often, school children will teach elders about IT such as the use of computers and smartphones. Reciprocally, elders may tutor school kids subjects like Chinese, English or Mathematics. Intergenerational learning is a co-learning process as the old and young can acquire new skills and information, learn about oneself and the lives of others, as well as gain insight from the interactions (Manheimer, 1997). Such co-learning plays an important role in building cohesiveness, trust, and solidarity, developing the ability for synergy and interdependence, and strengthening the links involved in the harmony between older and younger generations.

Intergenerational learning is also happening inside the university classrooms, where younger undergraduate students will learn together with older persons who also take part in class discussions with them, resulting in intergenerational sharing of views and experiences. Unlike many lifelong learning curricula and provisions that target mainly older learners, elder academies in Hong Kong aim to achieve intergenerational learning and solidarity to result in mutual benefits for the old and young. They provide a platform for intergenerational interaction and communication to enhance elders' understanding of society, and to build a sense of responsibility in contributing to society among young people (Tam, 2019).

Though ideal it might seem, the Elder Academy Network is not without criticisms. Current funding for elder academies is irregular and non-recurrent, small and inadequate, which has compelled providers to compete with each other for the limited resources and to operate on a market-oriented basis. Providers very often find themselves facing a tension between a commitment to the provision of elder learning as a community service and the need to

operate on a self-financing basis through competition in the marketplace. Because of the need of staying competitive or simply surviving in the market, providers have to choose between offering courses that will address the immediate wants of the elder learners and providing the kinds of knowledge and skills that are needed in the long run. To this effect, providers are facing the dilemma of providing learning for communitarian values, on the one hand, and offering learning opportunities that can be readily accepted by the market, on the other (ibid).

Sixteen years on since its establishment in 2007, there remains a lack of information if the EA policy, provision and practice have been effective, adequate and valued from the perspective of different stakeholders. Research upon an evaluation of the Elder Academy Scheme is needed to assess how effective the approach has been in achieving its objectives. Over the past sixteen years, there has been a rapid expansion in terms of the number of elder academies in the network, an increased range in the types of programmes available, and the ever-increasing participation rates among older and younger persons in Hong Kong. Such expansion has occurred in the absence of any comprehensive evaluation or assessment. There is a need to address this crucial gap by critically examining the efficacy, adequacy and value of the policy, provision and practice of how lifelong learning across generations is planned and organised in Hong Kong. It will provide invaluable feedback to the Elder Academy Scheme from stakeholders to determine if its objectives and targets are being met and will provide important information for further improvement and development. Such evaluative information should also be valuable to the international community if there are possibilities for the approach to be replicated outside of Hong Kong.

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