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Topic: Innovations and Good Practices in Volunteering

The University of the Third Age:
Achieving Life-long Learning and Servicing Culture

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Abstract

The global phenomenon of a rising ageing population has created both opportunity and needs. Hong Kong being a part of the global village is facing the same phenomenon with a growing number of baby boomers reaching the third age. The promotion and maintenance of healthy ageing amongst people reaching the third age presents challenges, as their needs to continue as active learner and contributor have been neglected. The University of the Third Age has been developing in the last thirty years in providing the third age people with the opportunity to learn and serve. With the active third age members, a positive image of ageing has been established. Having limited government support and able members, the bottom-up model of the University of the Third Age would be a good approach for Hong Kong. The more educated members would welcome the autonomy to run their own organization. Hong Kong should expedite the development of the University of the Third Age. In providing the third age population a channel to achieve life-long learning and servicing culture, part of the challenges and opportunities of healthy ageing can be gainfully addressed.

Introduction

The worldwide trend of an ageing population has prompted the adoption of Healthy Ageing strategy in most developed countries. Health as defined by the World Health Organization (2002) is a state of complete physical, social and mental well-being. The focus on health should be on optimizing the functioning of the body and mind instead of the absence of diseases. Active ageing is the process of capturing opportunities for participation in order to enhance quality of life. With an estimation of 759,200 older persons (aged 65 and over) in 2000, accounting for 11.2% of total

population, we anticipate that by 2021, 1,322,500 persons accounting for 15.7% of total population will be in the older group as stated in the Report on Healthy Ageing (Elderly Commission, 2001). Hong Kong is facing a growing number of baby boomers reaching third age (50-75). Future cohort of older people may be healthier and more independent into their' eighties. The promotion and maintenance of healthy ageing among people reaching third age presents challenges not only for this group with relatively higher education attainment than their previous counter group, but also to the community as the need has not been fully addressed will create social, political and medical demands.
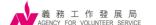
In view of the multitudes of pressing issues, the Elderly Commission has its hands full with the sick and needy that demand immediate attention. In keeping with Healthy Ageing as the key strategy to cope with ageing population, it would be to the advantage of the ageing population to champion their own projects in line with this goal. As there is no readily available platform for the group of physically healthy third age persons to participate in learning and servicing from a bottom up approach, the University for the Third Age should be encouraged as this initiative consists the view of ageing as a positive process with opportunities and needs. In this paper, a model of the University of the Third Age can be adapted in Hong Kong as means to achieve life-long learning and servicing culture shall be discussed.

The Universities of the Third Age (U3As)

There are two models of University of the Third Age. The concept of the University of the Third Age was originated in France during a University summer school in 1972. By enrolling in non-credit courses, the French in their third age could enjoy learning at a moderate fee in the local universities. The University of the Third Age in Britain was initiated by the founding of 'Third Age Trust' in 1982. Instead of getting universities to offer courses to the third age, the group of the third age formed their own organization. They taught and learnt from each other by offering and taking courses within the group. This is a bottom-up approach within the group of third age, learning and servicing each other. There are different variations of these two models in different countries, varying in line with their societal culture.

How can the two models of the U3A be applied in Hong Kong? The French model would be easier to set up and operate, but it would be higher in costs. With the cutting of budgets in the tertiary education sector, it is less likely for the higher education administrators to allocate resources in this area. However, this model

should still encourage, so that some of those who are more sympathetic towards the needs of the ageing population could support a limited program to test the water. If the program has been properly designed and conducted, recognition and private funding would follow.

The British model would be more difficult to set up and operated as the establishment is basically a volunteering organization. The structure generally consists of a management committee with majority of its members being highly educated. They are in-charged of the approval of the courses and running of the operation. The teachers and students are all members of the U3A. The teachers will submit their courses to the management committee for approval before offering them to other members. Members will be required to pay a membership fee and a fee to cover the operational costs. This is a program of learning and servicing with the third age being teachers and students as they wish. It also provides a network for the like minder people to meet and organize social service projects that utilize their expertise. Volunteering will enhance the quality of life of the third age by meeting their psychological and social needs. Although, both models should be introduced in Hong Kong, yet the British model should be encouraged as it would serve to enhance not only continue learning but servicing as well.

Achieving Life-long Learning and Servicing Culture

The hours of paid work decline after 50 and drop sharply after 60. The hours of unpaid productivity continue to later in life beyond age 75. People who enjoy work will want to continue to maintain the social interactions and relationships with coworker. Baby boomers are more likely to be comfortable not to follow the retirement norm and do their own thing. Sweden and Japan's "Internalization approach" which provides a transition period between full-time employments and complete exit from work through flexible employment options (Usui, 1998). This approach seems to be very good for people to ease into their retirement. With many people report to be more active as volunteers when they enter retirement, however, volunteering does not show a significant increase after retirement and participation in voluntary organization varies as a function of degree of connectedness with others in the organization (National Research Council, 2001). To be part of a voluntary organization takes time and energy from the individual volunteer. The start up of a U3A would be a way to build the connectedness required in order to sustain the voluntary work for the retire persons.

The following is a proposed project to establish an institute of U3A for learning and servicing for the group of the third age. This will provide opportunities to access and mobilize social capital available to achieve life long learning, volunteering culture and productive ageing. The objective of the U3A is to promote changes in communities that will facilitate healthy living and ageing in place through the development of support networks with the U3A and other stakeholders; enhance learning and teaching of subject matters that is of interest to the U3A members and encourages life long learning, volunteerism and active ageing; promote a positive image of ageing through encouraging U3A members to take up mentoring opportunity in order to facilitate older persons to continue to take part in community and to contribute to the younger generation; provide platform to build networks between third age members with education institutes, trade, business and professional associations to obtain and fully utilize resources available.

The target groups for this project consist of two groups. The primary group includes the third age group, associate and pre-associate degree students. The secondary group includes education institute, professional, trade and business associations. A summary of operations has been set out in the following:

Structure: A Management Committee consists of business and professional people with degree or professional qualifications will be formed. Membership will be gradually built through soliciting members from professional, trade and business associations. A small office hosted by one of the educational institutes with associate and pre-associate students shall be established. A full-time Project Manager handling the membership, administration and promotion of courses and assisted by two part-time helpers shall be recruited.

Courses: The courses can be offered or requested by members. Courses may vary from leisure and fun to academic in nature, anything proposed or requested will be considered. Those members with proposed courses shall act as teachers upon approval of the courses by the Management Committee. The delivery can be creative and duration can be flexible. For courses being requested, suitable teachers will be sought by the Management Committee, Project manager or through newsletters. Learning from "The Role of The UTAs-Ten Reports" (Lefévre, Declerck and Louis 1995), a set of courses related to preparation for ageing would be timely for Hong Kong U3As to attract, prepare and enhance bonding of the members.

Facility and Fees: An annual membership fees between around $200 will be

charged. Small course fee will be charged to recover the cost of classroom, equipment, material and honorarium if required. It is anticipated that the Elderly Commission shall set up a 'U3A Trust' in the near future. When and if the Trust has been materialized in Hong Kong, it will take care some of the initial support needed by individual U3As. Small private funding can be sourced as soon as one model U3A has been successfully launched.

Data Bank: Set up standard materials of positive ageing interested by the group. Pre-retirement packages including health care, financial planning, social functions and community services should be the first to be complied. The material collected in the data bank can be shared among all U3As.

There are immediate and long-term impacts of this project. The immediate results for third age members: Provide good courses to attend, a way to offer courses, mentoring of younger generation, networking opportunity with other members and organizations. For other stakeholders: Provide networking opportunity for all involved organizations, tap into the resources of third age members with extensive knowledge as mentors, volunteers, consultants and providers of part-time or full-time service. As for long-term impacts: this project projects positive image of ageing in Hong Kong, enhance healthy ageing for third age members by presenting the opportunity to be fully engaged as part of the community and share knowledge and experience of running U3A to nurture the culture of life long learning and servicing.

Conclusions

We are facing the challenge of a growing older population. The ways in which these challenges are met by our society will determine the quality of life not only for the current generation but also those that are to be old in the remote future. With the growth in the older population, it is imperative that we develop an accurate understanding toward ageing and old age and how negative attitudes on intergenerational contacts and social policies affect older people. Ageism should not be tolerated; it is often evolved from anxieties about one's own fear of ageing and reinforced by messages in the media (Hooyman and Kiyak, 2002). Our contact with the older people in a mutually nurturing environment can significantly reduce ageism.

The U3A project serves the gap of providing services and learning opportunities for the third age persons that are more educated from a bottom up approach. The U3A

courses can be as creative in design, content and delivery as offered by the members. The members can also act as a self-help group to provide a comprehensive pre-retirement program that is not ready available in Hong Kong. The pre-associate and associate degree students can benefit from the third age members as their mentors and the stereotyping of older people can be reduced when positive interaction has been introduced with the younger generation. Since the tremendous growth in the ageing population is inevitable, as a society, we should be prepared to meet the third age's need for life-long learning and develop their growing power in volunteerism by adopting the Universities of the Third Age as platforms to serve both purposes.

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