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Title Page

Back to the campus: Lifelong experience of older learners in a university setting

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Abstract

This study focuses on older participants' experiences of and views on a lifelong learning program at the Xxxx Xxxx XXXXXXXXXXXX University in Hong Kong. As many third age adults tend not to have the opportunity to receive tertiary education when they were young, this program aims to fulfil their dream of studying at a university and boost their self-esteem and self-confidence. Using qualitative research methods, this research was conducted after the MiniU program (supported by the Institute of XXXXXX XXXXXX of the Xxxx Xxxx XXXXXXXXXXXX University). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 32 participants after the program. While participants had acquired knowledge and experience of university life from the Mini-U program, they also reported concerns and difficulties with participation including difficulties in memorizing course content and financial difficulties. The program has offered an unique opportunity for enhancing participants' interpersonal relationships and wellbeing. The research also further inform the development of creative lifelong learning programs aimed at improving the well-being of older people.

Keywords: Lifelong-learning, well-being, older people

Introduction

Research has shown that older people in Hong Kong are interested in continuing their learning. Lifelong learning not only benefits their health, but it also provides a source of leisure and facilitates personal development (Tam, Boulton-Lewis, Buys, & Chui, 2017). In addition to learning for job promotion, older adults may consider lifelong learning as a way to stay active and socially connected with other people in later life. Indeed, it has been suggested that frequent social interaction serves as one of the most effective preventions of dementia (Hong Kong Alzheimer's Disease Association's, 2015). For older adults in Hong Kong, formal teacher-classroom context has been identified as the most desirable approach to lifelong learning (Tam, Aird, Boulton-Lewis, & Buys, 2016).

University programs for older people

Active aging is an important global focus of practices and policies aimed at enhancing people's well-being in late life (World Health Organization [WHO], 2002). Full participation in society not only benefits older people, but it also creates a wider positive view toward aging (United Nations [UN], 2002). Among the various forms of participation, lifelong learning has gained attention in many countries. A growing number of university programs have been specifically designed for older people across the globe (Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2013; Zielińska-Więczkowska, Kędziora-Kornatowska, & Ciemnoczołowski, 2011). In European societies in particular, university programs for older adults – widely known as 'Universities of the Third-Age' – play a key role in enabling older adults to make use of their experience and potential to achieve life satisfaction and contribute to society (Günder, 2014; Tatlıdil, 2011). With the rising number of older people in the general population, Asian societies, including Hong Kong, Mainland China, Singapore, and Korea, have also adopted different strategies for facilitating lifelong learning among older people, although education for older people has not been a priority for governments (Chui, 2012; Jun & Evans, 2014).

In general, university programs designed for older people have been established to meet two major aims including promoting lifelong learning and enhancing active aging. These also serve as the priority directions of worldwide policies for enhancing the well-being of older adults (UN, 2002; WHO, 2002). Nevertheless, negative cultural stereotypes associated with older people – seen as unable to learn or incompetent (Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005; Fernández-Ballesteros, 1992, 2005) – have impeded the promotion of lifelong learning and active aging (Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2013).

By extending education into old age and supporting active aging in general, the development of university programs specifically designed for older people serves as an innovative tool to promote social inclusion, active citizenship, and personal development among older people (Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2013). In general, gerontological research on cognitive plasticity in recent decades has well documented learning potential throughout the lifespan including among older adults in later life (Fernández-Ballesteros, Molina, Schettini, & Del Rey, 2012). University programs for older adults create the opportunities for their comprehensive development and minimize their experience of marginalization (Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2013; Marcinkiewicz-Wilk, 2011). Marginalization refers to the social process of becoming or being relegated to the edge of society. Marginalized people have limited access to power (Mullaly, 2006). Through activities including health education, intellectual activities, physical activities, or artistic expression, university programs for older people can equip them with knowledge and skills for growing old via lifelong learning activities (Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2012; Marcinkiewicz-Wilk, 2011). Lifelong learning programs can also encourage older people to maintain active citizenship in economic and cultural fields and contribute to wider society by drawing on their past experience and potential (Günder, 2014).

Previous studies have highlighted the benefits of lifelong learning programs in international contexts. One study by Fernández-Ballesteros et al. (2013) found that people attending university programs specifically designed for older adults in Spain, Mexico, Chile, and Cuba reported significant improvement in self-perceptions of aging, group stereotypes, and emotional balance due to a reduction in negative moods. Another study of a university program for older adults in Spain showed that participants reported satisfactory outcomes in cognitive performance, health, activity levels (information-seeking and social activities), and positive affect (Fernández-Ballesteros, Molina, Schettini, & Del Rey, 2012). Similarly, Ordonez, Tavares, and Cachioni (2011) found that older adults attending a third-age university program in Brazil showed significantly fewer depressive symptoms after one academic semester, with the program playing a protective role against depression for participants. A study of a third-age university program in Poland showed that these older adults demonstrated stable parameters of quality of life in all areas of functioning (Zielińska-Więczkowska et al., 2011). Finally, research conducted in Canada also showed that older adults' engagement in community-based lifelong learning opportunities was positively associated with psychological wellbeing, even among those who were most vulnerable (Narushima, Liu, & Diestelkamp, 2018).

In China, a few studies have indicated that university programs for older adults have a positive effect on their quality of life and improve their social and community engagement (Chen, 2010; Yang, 2011; Zhao & Chui, 2019). Some Chinese university programs have encouraged older people to participate in community services and voluntary activities and therefore enhanced older people's productive aging (Zhao & Chui, 2019). In South Korea, a study found that older people attending a 'Senior University' reported high levels of life satisfaction (Jun & Evans, 2019). Hwangbo (2015) also highlighted the relationship between participation in university programs for older people and active aging in physical,

psychological, social, and cognitive domains. While the range of subjects offered in different universities and the duration of the above-mentioned programs vary across contexts, the existing literature shows that learning opportunities for older people enabled them to develop strategies to strengthen their capacities and become fulfilled in daily life.

It is noteworthy that the culture of learning and institutional support are important factors to be considered when extending education into old age through university programs. For instance, a comparative study of university programs for older adults in the UK and South Korea found that the University of the Third Age in the UK developed from local traditions of liberalism and self-help, whereas the Senior University in South Korea developed based on collectivism and Confucianism (Jun & Evans, 2014). The study highlights the importance of attending to local cultural dynamics, specifically the culture of learning, when designing the programs in order to cater to different learning needs and yield the best outcomes for older learners (Jun & Evans, 2014). Jun and Evans (2019) also call for government action to promote wider perspectives on learning including formal and informal and instrumental, expressive, academic, and social dimensions of learning. In Mainland China, Zhao and Chui (2019) note that Chinese people are generally motivated to engage in lifelong learning due to Confucian culture. Chinese older adults' active engagement in learning can be regarded as a positive attempt to make an important contribution to society as it can potentially enhance active aging (Du & Wang, 2013).

Nevertheless, China still lacks a systematic approach to promoting lifelong learning via university programs (Zhao & Chui, 2019). Research on the benefits of university programs for older adults has been scant, particularly in Asian contexts, and there is a need for further studies of the impact of university programs on their well-being and health. Thus, this study aimed to examine the impact of a lifelong learning program in a university setting

among older people in Hong Kong. The findings can assist other universities in the development of programs for lifelong learning.

Materials & Methods

Research context and sample

The MiniU program is an ongoing annual summer program that has been organized by the Institute of XXXXXX XXXXXX at the XXXX XXXX XXXXXXXXXXXXX University since 2007. The purpose of this program is to make good use of the university's built environment and space during the summer break to provide an experience of university life for older people aged 55 and above. The MiniU program aims to empower older people through education to enhance their self-esteem and self-confidence to interact with other people and society at large. In each summer, the MiniU offers a two-week program with 10 full days (about 6 hours per day) of classes on a variety of practical and leisure subjects. It provides an overall university experience for participants including a learning experience at a university campus, a one-night stay in student accommodations, and a graduation ceremony.

This study collected data from on older learners aged 55 and above who took part in the annual MiniU program between 2017 to 2018. The project received ethics approval by the Human Subjects Ethics Sub-committee of The XXXX XXXX XXXXXXXXXXXXX University (HSEXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX). Participants were recruited through websites, social media, and newspaper advertisements. According to the registration record, about 120 participants took part in the MiniU program over the two-year period (60 participants in 2017, 57 participants in 2018). A targeted sample of 12 to 15 participants were randomly selected from each year's cohort to take part in a qualitative interview after the program. As a result, a total of 32 participants (18 from the 2017 cohort, 14 from the 2018 cohort) were included in this study. The basic demographics of these participants are presented in Table 1. The majority of

participants were in their 60s. Based on the recent census data in 2016, older adults in their 60s took up a greater proportion than their counterparts in the 50s and 70s. In fact, compared with the census data, our sample is relatively more educated. Most participants (68.75%) had received secondary education, whereas the recent census data showed that only 30.5% of older men and 18% of older women had attended upper secondary or higher education.

Pseudonyms are used in this article to protect confidentiality.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the sample (n = 32)

Variable		n (%) / mean (SD)
Gender	Male	7 (22%)
	Female	25 (78%)
Age		61.38 (5.16)
	50-59	9 (28%)
	60-69	21 (66%)
	70 and above	2 (6%)
Educational level	Primary School	1 (3%)
	Secondary school	23 (72%)
	Diploma/certificate	6 (19%)
	Bachelor or above	2 (6%)

Research design

As older learners have rich and uniquely diverse experiences, aspirations, and motivations for taking part in lifelong learning, a narrative inquiry approach (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016) was adopted to capture the views, perspectives, and experiences of older participants in the MiniU program. Interview questions focused on their overall experiences and feelings towards the program, gains and challenges involved in their participation in MiniU lifelong learning activities, motivations to take part in the MiniU program, and other perspectives or views on lifelong learning. Each interview took about one hour and was

conducted by trained interviewers with Master's degrees in social sciences, including sociology and social work.

Data analysis

To illustrate the benefits and challenges of the program, this article focuses on the post-interview responses from participants, who shared their overall experiences of and views on the program. All interviews were audio-recorded. Each audio file was reviewed and codes and themes were manually coded, identified, and recorded using MAXQDA, a data analysis software program. The six-step thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was adopted for the data analysis process. The first level involved identifying codes and themes, which were verified by the research team involved in data analysis. The second level involved further consolidation of codes and themes and conceptualizing connections between similar and different themes based upon the stories or narrations revealed in the interviews. By comparing and analysing the similarities and differences between different codes, candidate themes and subthemes were selected to form an initial thematic framework. The conceptual components were repeatedly reviewed to ensure that the candidate themes were internally coherent, accurate, and distinctive. The themes were then (re)defined and organized in a systematic way, and the final phase involved identifying four main themes to present an overall picture of the entire dataset. Peer review of the themes were conducted among four research team members, who ensured that the four main themes accurately reflected the data. Audit trail was also used to record every step of the data analysis process.

Results

Four main themes emerged from the findings. The first theme concerns what participants have acquired from the MiniU program, such as knowledge and overall experience. Almost all participants expressed concerns about their physical and mental health

and reported that the program was practical and useful for them. The second theme concerns the difficulties faced in participating in the program including difficulties in memorizing course content and financial difficulties. The third theme focuses on the impact of participation in MiniU on participants' interpersonal relationships including ones with family members and friends. The fourth theme focuses on the impact of knowledge acquired through the program on participants' lives.

Theme 1. Gains from the MiniU program

University experience. Most of the participants explained that they enjoyed the program because it provided them with a university experience. They described the experience of having classes in a university setting – including the one-night stay at student accommodations, graduation ceremony, wearing a gown, and having classes within university campus like university students – as unique and precious. For example, CA, a female participant in her mid-50s, had never experienced university life. She said that never wearing a university gown was like being a woman married without wearing a bridal gown, and that her MiniU experience gave her a taste of wearing the gown. Many participants reported that the experience gave them a sense of achievement because they had never had the chance to study at university when they were young:

Even though I wanted to attend school, I didn't have any chance to do it because I didn't have money for learning. I had to take up both part-time and full-time jobs to support my family financially. I am retired now.... I wanted to experience university life. Unlike other interest classes, this program has a regular time schedule, which is similar to the university life. (CD, a male participant in his 60s)

Another female participant CB at early 50s, explained that the MiniU experience allowed them to feel their younger selves:

I wanted to act like a student and feel the same as students... I only eat at canteen because I want to feel like back to the younger me when I was a student. Just stay at the time as if I was a student and experience it.

Acquiring new knowledge and skills. Eight participants believed that by gaining new knowledge, they could not only keep healthy, but they could also keep up with the pace of fast-developing society:

The society is developing and people would face different challenges, so people should keep on learning. By keeping studying, older people can gain latest information, which reduces chances for them to be excluded... If I don't keep learning new things, I will be excluded by society... People should keep learning even when they are aging and keep young at heart. (CC, a female participant in her 60s)

Another male participant MH at almost 60 explained that the MiniU experience allowed them to learn new skills: *"I love painting but I have never got a chance to try it. I have tried painting here and I can do it. I feel so happy about it."* Some participants believed that lifelong learning could be considered a stimulation of their brain and a way to help them improve their memory and stay in good mental health condition. As CP, a female participant in her 60s, explained: *"My brain works well now. Learning can keep my mind sharp and slow down the decline of brain health. Learning something motivates us go outside which is good for health."*

Theme 2. Challenges to participating in MiniU activities

Participants described a number of challenges that impeded their participation in MiniU activities. Some also identified suggestions to improve older adults' experience in the program.

Difficulties in memorizing course content. Almost all participants believed that they had poor memory which made it hard for them to follow and remember what was taught in

the program. Thus, they believed that the class schedule needed to be adjusted based on their learning pattern. For instance, it would be good to provide them with more time to digest course materials and to extend the duration of the whole program. CD, a male participant in his 60s, said that his memory was declining and thus he had difficulties in memorizing what instructors had taught in class:

I find it difficult to remember Japanese words in such a short period. Learning Japanese requires continuous efforts and longer time... Two weeks were too short. I suggest the classes can be arranged once every two days. In that case, the whole program could be extended to one month. Extending the program duration can give time for participants to comprehend what were taught in classes.

Financial concerns. At least three participants described financial concerns associated with participating in MiniU activities. Although they were willing to join different courses and activities, without income after retirement and sufficient pension, the tuition fees for the courses were considered financial burden. Some participants received a subsidy to participant in the program. For example, CP, a female participant in her 60s, received a subsidy for the program fee, and said that the program would be too expensive without this subsidy. LU, another female participant in her 60s, also shared that the program fee was a concern for some:

In term of money, the tuition fee of [the] program is expensive. I have participated in other program... I have only paid HK\$100, because that program has got funding from the Jockey Club. They recruited 120 persons in total and sponsored HK\$10,000 per person... Some classmates have complained that the program fee was too expensive. I suggest finding more sponsorships and IAA could return certain percentage of tuition fee if participants have full participation in the program.

Theme 3. Enhancement of personal and social relationships

Participants reported that their interpersonal relationships were also improved through participation in the MiniU program including their relationships with their spouses, with their children, and with friends.

Relationships with spouses. In most cases, male participants were responsible for earning money and female participants were responsible for taking care of family and doing domestic work. Some participants reported that they quarrelled a lot with their spouses because they had been spending more time together since retirement. After joining the program, several participants believed that their relationships with their spouses had improved, with fewer conflicts, because they spent less time at home. As CP, a female participant in her 60s, explained:

If older adults stay at home all the time, conflicts will easily occur between our family members and us, thus affecting our relationships... If I actively participate in lifelong learning activities, my family relationship would be better, because I will not stay at home all the time.

Other participants reported that they could apply new health-related knowledge in their relationships to help their spouses:

When I have learned new health-related knowledge, I will share it with my family members. For example, I shared with my wife after I learnt aerobics... I shared with her things that can be applied in everyday life, such as how to reduce pain, how to do exercise. I think these are useful to my wife, so I share with her what I think is useful to her. (LY, a male participant in his 60s)

Relationships with children. Seven participants stated that their relationships with children improved due to participation in the MiniU program, because they had more things to talk about with their children and could thus connect with them. MiniU course content was not only considered useful to their daily lives, but it was also regarded as a bridge for

communication because it helped the participants to identify some common topics that could reduce generational gaps. One participant, SW at her mid-50s, stated that one of the reasons that she joined this program was to show her children that she was still working hard after retirement. With new knowledge acquired from the program, SW could more easily understand what her children were talking about and she also had more topics to discuss with her children. As another participant explained,

Updating ourselves enables us older people [to] understand the topics and thoughts of young people, so I think life-long learning can improve older people's communication with their children. Life-long learning activities enrich older people's life and we would not [spend] the majority of our time on staying with our children, which reduces chances for older people to quarrel with children and gives more room for our children. (CL, a female participant in her 60s)

Relationship with friends. All participants believed that their interpersonal relationships improved because they had more topics to share with their friends. They could also extend their social networks via the program and the one-night stay at student accommodations. Many participants had felt lonely after retirement because they did not have friends. They could get along with each other and regularly spend time together after the program: *"I can share what I have learnt to my friends, so learning can provide me with topics that I can then discuss with my friends. My friends can learn something from me"* (KS, a male participant in his 60s).

Theme 4. Impacts on health and wellbeing

Physical wellbeing. Almost all MiniU participants expressed concerns about their physical and mental health including physical pain, difficulties in memorizing course content, depression, high blood pressure, and dementia. For example, CC, a female participant in her early 60s and previously had cancer, expressed a need to gain knowledge related to health

and how to properly take care of her body and exercise. Eight participants stated that learning health-related knowledge helped them improve their physical health condition, such as relieving feet and joint pain, reducing difficulties in memorizing course content, and preventing dementia and high blood pressure. For instance, one male participant in his 60s indicated:

It is common for us to get pain in [our] bodies so it is useful to further studying about this area. Classes about physical pain are good because the instructor taught us well. The instructor taught us how to self-massage along meridians and acupoints to reduce physical pain and I can practice during class. I think this kind of practical knowledge is very suitable for me, and it is much more effective than just listening to lectures without practice... I will keep practicing the physical exercises that I learnt from the courses. (LW, a male participant in his 60s)

Moreover, participating in activities and learning new things motivated them to join more outdoor activities, which helped improve their physical and mental health.

Emotional wellbeing. Six participants expressed that participating in MiniU encouraged them to embrace more positive emotions including happiness, sense of purpose, satisfaction, and self-fulfilment. Happiness was the most common word used by the participants to describe their MiniU experiences. For example, CC, a participant in her 60s, was very happy and excited when talking about her university experience:

This experience is way beyond my expectation. I didn't expect I could be as happy as this. I feel so happy, because I can finally let go of all the burden and worry about nothing. You know that at our age, we have older parents to take care of. And they have a lot of worries and problems, because they are really old. We are so worried about our older parents; at the same time, we need to take care of our children... I

can put all these burdens aside for two weeks and fully enjoy the university experience, like back to the years when I was a student.

While many participants felt that the MiniU program had boosted their positive emotion, some explained that participating in the program also helped to reduce negative emotions, such as depression and loneliness. For example, CL, a female participant at almost 60 years old, believed that people would have a higher chance of becoming depressed if they stayed at home all the time, and that learning could allow participants to interact with other people and express their feelings, which could reduce their chances of depression. Similarly, LW, a participant in his 60s, explained:

I need to keep myself busy after I have retired. I should keep studying new stuff so as to catch up with society. If I don't go out to learn something, I have nothing to do. It will make me think that I am useless and develop negative emotions.

Discussion

This study provides new insights into the benefits of lifelong learning in university setting among older people in Hong Kong. By focusing on participants' experiences of the MiniU program organized by the Institute of Xxxxxxx Xxxxxxx at the Xxxx Xxxx Xxxxxxxxxxx University, this study showed that older people gained positive experiences and new knowledge and skills from the program. Although participants reported different concerns and difficulties in joining program activities, the program generated positive impact on their interpersonal relationships including their relationships with their spouses, children, and friends, and contributed to better physical and emotional well-being. By revealing the benefits of the program and older participants' experiences of difficulties during the program, this study can assist other universities in the development of programs for lifelong learning.

The findings about the benefits of lifelong learning gained from the MiniU program are consistent with previous research which highlights the positive impact of university programs specifically targeted at older people in international contexts. It is generally believed that this kind of university programs in Western contexts can enhance older adults' comprehensive development, and equally importantly, minimize their experience of marginalization and help them to fully participate in society (Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2013; Hwangbo, 2015; Marcinkiewicz-Wilk, 2011). A few studies conducted in Mainland China have also indicated that university programs for older adults have a positive effect on quality of life and improve their social and community engagement (Chen, 2010; Yang, 2011). Consistent with the findings of previous studies, this study showed that participants of the MiniU program benefited from better personal and social relationships after joining the program. Moreover, echoing Zhao and Chui's (2019) study about Chinese people's strong motivation for engaging in lifelong learning due to Confucian culture, the findings highlighted that the university experience was of great value to many participants, who were able to feel young and keep up with the fast-developing Hong Kong society through the program.

On the other hand, the present study also reveals a number of challenges confronting older people who may want to participate in lifelong learning. By gathering participants' views on their difficulties and challenges in their participation in the program, this study has identified important directions to enhance older adults' experiences of lifelong learning. For instance, participants expressed that the tuition fees of the MiniU program constituted financial burden for them, even though they were enthusiastic about joining different courses and activities. In addition, deteriorating physical conditions associated with aging, such as difficulties in memorizing course content, were regarded by participants as difficulties in their participation in the program. In other words, when developing university programs

targeted at older people in the future, more attention should be paid to take older people's financial and physical abilities into account.

The findings of the present study suggest that older people are eager to learn and that they can benefit from lifelong learning in the university setting in Hong Kong. They also have significant implications for the development of university programs targeted at older people in other cultural and geographic regions. As suggested in the existing literature, institutional support plays a key role in the extension of education into old age through university programs (Jun & Evans, 2014, 2019). Based on the findings, it is recommended that more resources should be distributed to universities to launch lifelong learning programs specifically designed for older people and to provide subsidies for older people, especially those who lack income and sufficient pension after retirement. Also, the government and universities should promote wider perspectives on lifelong learning, which do not necessarily focus on memorizing learning materials but knowledge and skills that can be easily applied to older people's personal and social life. The university learning programs should also cater to the unique cultural values in the local context so that the programs match older people's interests and needs.

Despite its research significance, the present study has its limitations. First, given the small sample size of the study, the findings are not intended to be generalized to the wider populations of older people in Hong Kong. Whether and how Chinese older adults with different backgrounds can benefit from lifelong learning in university setting remains an understudied area for further research. Future research can expand the scope by using larger-scale surveys to assess public beliefs toward universities' social responsibilities of providing lifelong learning to older learners. Second, the current study only focused on older learners' perspectives on the MiniU program, although a small number of younger students were also involved as classroom helpers in the program. Future university learning programs could be

expanded to cover intergenerational learning to examine perspectives of both younger and older generations about the benefits of lifelong learning in university settings.

To conclude, this study provides empirical evidence of the positive impact of lifelong learning on older people. It has important implications for the development of lifelong learning programs aimed at improving the well-being of older people. For service providers working with older people, it would be beneficial to encourage older adults to engage in lifelong learning programs to facilitate their physical, emotional, and social well-being.

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Declaration of interest statement

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