

# Active Ageing, Active Learning

# EDUCATION IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION: ISSUES, CONCERNS AND PROSPECTS

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Volume 15

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Gillian Boulton-Lewis • Maureen Tam  
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# Active Ageing, Active Learning

Issues and Challenges

 Springer

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ISBN 978-94-007-2110-4 e-ISBN 978-94-007-2111-1

DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-2111-1

Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg London New York

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011938283

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Printed on acid-free paper

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## Series Editors' Introduction

One of the most striking features of the modern world is its changing demographic profile. In almost any policy arena, the issue of demographic change (or ageing) sits alongside globalisation, climate change and the knowledge revolution as areas which are transforming societies, including the ways in which we organise and go about our work activities. This is a significant and worldwide phenomenon. What emerges is a picture of a worldwide trend that touches many aspects of, for example, employment and the labour market, but one which also needs to take account of the very different economies, political systems and societies in the world.

The scale of this demographic change means that ageing is no longer a matter of how individuals adapt to the ageing process but how society adapts to the irreversible changes that are under way. In many countries, current policies and institutions are not designed to address the challenges and opportunities of this future, either in terms of education or the world of work. Looking at Asia, Japan has nearly 23% of the population over 65 years old and for the last 3 years has had negative population growth. Thailand has over 9% aged over 65 but has a population growth rate of approximately 0.6% pa. Taiwan has 10% aged over 65 and has a growth rate that has declined from 0.64% pa in 2000 to 0.23% in 2009. Hong Kong has 12.5% aged over 65, and it is estimated that this will rise to 26.8% by 2033. It also has one of the lowest population growth rates in the world.

A common perception is that an ageing population will have negative consequences for society. We regularly hear alarm bells sounding from governments, particularly in the developed world, about the financial consequences in terms of increased pension, health and care costs and the social consequences through the requirement for additional family care responsibilities and an increased tax base for the ever decreasing working population. Reactions in certain countries have been to consider raising the retirement age, or more accurately, to raise the age at which state pension provisions and other benefits for the elderly will be provided. This is not proving a politically popular option in many countries, especially amongst those people who are approaching retirement age or those that have physically demanding jobs. Singapore has introduced 'from retire to rehire' as a policy measure. This provides

retraining for elderly employees who are approaching retirement age or who have retired and wish (through desire or necessity) to return to the labour force.

What has not actually been proven conclusively is how much actual concrete evidence justifies these government reactions to ageing. We do not fully understand, for example, how changes in the age structure of the population will affect social attitudes, values, norms and behaviours. There is much uncertainty over social and economic variables. Knowledge is continuing to be developed through research into the impact of population ageing, and the contributors to this book provide valuable research and insight to address the key questions that are raised by an ageing population:

- How can a large elderly population that is living longer maintain its productivity and contribute to its own and society's well-being?
- Will an ageing population change the economies, cultures and politics?
- How can institutions and policies related to workforce development and health-care and education be reformed to positively affect the future?
- Will an ageing population widen the gap between the haves and have-nots?
- How will continued learning contribute to active ageing and a healthier lifestyle for people as they age?

Education is going to become increasingly important in an ageing world to enable people, in particular those with physically demanding work, to gain new workplace skills to enable them to work for longer as retirement ages are edged upwards in response to increased longevity.

This book provides a fascinating collection of papers that discuss the issues involved and highlights the dedication and the commitment of the authors in this volume in the field of elderly learning.

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# Foreword

Many countries throughout the world are facing the prospect of a rapidly ageing population over the present and forthcoming decades – with quite radical shifts in the age profiles of their populations. This demographic phenomenon is arising from a complexity of social, economic, aspirational, health and medical factors, resulting in both falling birth rates and higher levels of longevity. It is presenting countries with the demographic reality and continuing prospect of diminishing proportions of citizens of normal working age and increasing proportions of elderly. It is challenging life-stage traditions in which participation in the workforce is seen as ending shortly before a generally short period of retirement in relative passivity and declining health and ability. It is also challenging social services, governments, economic planners, families and individuals with imperatives to review their own understanding and expectations of older persons and the established practices that they have in relation to the elderly.

Prominent among the social service institutions thus affected is that of education, especially from a lifelong learning perspective. A rapidly ageing population underlines the imperative to see educational opportunities and learning engagements distributed throughout the lifespan. It highlights the economic, health and welfare benefits of active learning in older age. It makes nonsense of stereotypes of older persons as non-adaptive, non-learners, fixed in their ways.

Prominent among the countries facing these realities is the Peoples' Republic of China and its Hong Kong Special Administrative Region – the former particularly through the success of its central family planning directives, the latter as the consequence of its advanced economic and social status.

Responding to that context, the Hong Kong Institute of Education has established a Centre for Lifelong Learning Research and Development with a particular focus on elderly learning, through its Elder Academy. An early focus of that Academy was to commission a series of critical reviews to evaluate the issues, policies, research and practices internationally in elderly learning and education. Those reviews – undertaken by a selection of internationally renowned researchers and scholar-practitioners in the field – were designed both to inform its own research and development plans and its advice to government instrumentalities in Hong Kong

and elsewhere. They were commissioned both for formal public presentation through a seminar series in Hong Kong and for international publication, in order to make them more widely available to educational planners, policy makers, providers and concerned members of the public worldwide.

This volume satisfies that latter goal in making a scholarly, informed and critical but very readable and practically grounded set of contributions available to an international readership. The initial set of seminar papers has been here supplemented by others commissioned to further enrich the overall picture of the field.

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# Preface

This book provides a unique collection of chapters by authors who are committed to supporting learning by elders internationally and in Hong Kong specifically. It focuses on ageing and learning, describes why learning is so important throughout life, attempts to counter ageism as it affects thinking about learning by elders and others in the community, presents some research in ageing and implications and describes provisions for ageing and learning in some parts of the Asia Pacific region.

The book arose from a series of seminars on Elder Learning, organized by Professor Richard Bagnall, then Director of the Centre for Lifelong Learning Research and Development, which took place at the Elder Academy of the Hong Kong Institute of Education from January to March 2009. The seminars were sponsored by the Elderly Commission and the Labour and Welfare Bureau of Hong Kong. The Foreword by Bagnall explains the origin of the seminars. The unifying theme of the seminars was ageing and learning. The intention was to provide background on issues for learning by elders in Hong Kong. The series included invited presentations dealing with lifelong learning, welfare and mental well-being into older age (Field, 09/01/2009); international educational initiatives for the elderly (Swindell, 16/01/2009); a narrative of learning and longevity (Pfahl, 20/02/2009); education for the elderly: why, how and what? (Boulton-Lewis, 06/03/2009); and Chinese ageism lives on: grassroots reports on elderly learning in rural Shaanxi, Jiangxi and Jiangsu (Boshier, 20/03/2009). To complement the seminars, there are additional invited chapters from Chui, Buys and Miller, Biggs and Tam. Chui describes and compares elderly learning in four different Chinese communities. Buys and Miller discuss the development of a quantitative multidimensional measure of active ageing. Biggs applies critical narrativity to stories of ageing in social policy, and Tam describes policy and support for lifelong learning by seniors in Hong Kong.

This compilation of scholarly work should constitute a valuable recent resource to contribute to the global understanding and knowledge base for later life learning and elder education.



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