

## **Lifelong learning for elders in Hong Kong: Policy and practice**

### Abstract

Hong Kong's ageing population is growing at an unprecedented rate. Over the past two decades, the government has implemented policies and innovative engagement activities for elders in areas including lifelong learning and community participation. This paper aims to discuss conceptual, policy and practical issues relevant to the participation of elders in lifelong learning; examine the role of government, providers and community agencies in developing policy and practice for elder learning in Hong Kong; discuss the "Elder Academy Network" approach to elder learning set up in 1997, which is marked by the retrocession to China and establishment of the Hong Kong Elderly Commission; investigate new directions in elder learning policy and practice; and finally, identify the needs for future research and policy development of lifelong learning for elders in Hong Kong.

### **Hong Kong's ageing population**

In Hong Kong, the rate of people ageing will accelerate in the next three decades from the present ratio of 1 in 8 citizens aged 65 or above in 2009 to 28 in 100 by 2039 (Hong Kong Population Projections, 2010-2039). Literally, the portion of the older population is growing from 12.5% currently to 28%, which is more than double by 2039. In fact, Hong Kong has the lowest fertility rate in Asia, which is 1.07, followed by Singapore (1.11), Taiwan (1.15) and Japan (1.21). Also, Hong Kong people are living a very long life with life expectancy averaging at 82.04 (CIA World Factbook, 2011). Because of the low fertility rate and longer life span due to better health care, Hong Kong is facing the challenge created by the fast ageing population, requiring the government to put in place policies and strategies to foster successful ageing, where lifelong learning is believed to play a vital role in promoting the quality of later life.

In fact, there is not an official definition of 'elders' or 'seniors' in Hong Kong. But the generally accepted view is that anyone above 60 is considered 'old'. This is partly because the official retirement age for civil servants in Hong Kong is 60. Citizens aged 65 and above are eligible for the 'Senior Citizen Card' which entitles them to many privileges and concessions offered by both public and private organizations, including the bus and railway companies, private doctors and hospitals, businesses and shops selling all kinds of products. Besides, the Hong Kong government metes out an 'Old Age Allowance', more commonly dubbed as 'Fruit Money', to elders aged 65 to 69 with a means test of their financial assets, but without the means test for elders aged 70 and above.

With respect to educational attainment, older people in Hong Kong generally have a very low level of formal education. In Hong Kong, about 36% of those aged 65 and above had received no schooling or barely attended kindergarten when they were surveyed in 2006 (Population By-Census 2008). However, more than half (52%) of the younger age group of persons aged 15 and above had an educational attainment up to senior secondary level. And the proportion of young people without any schooling was as low as just about 7% (ibid). There is obviously a gap between the older and younger populations in terms of formal schooling. Such discrepancy is more likely due to the 9-year compulsory education policy implemented by the British colonial government in the 1970s (Chau and Woo, 2008). Although the proportion of Hong Kong elders having a low level of education remains high, the prospect is looking good when the current younger generation with more education are getting old in future decades.

While the population in Hong Kong grows old with the education level of the older population improving over time, there are implications for government policy and provision to encompass lifelong learning for all, which begins in pre-school times, is carried on through basic compulsory and post-compulsory periods of formal education and training, and is then continued throughout life. Hong Kong elders today generally have a lower education level than the population as a whole might have special needs in terms of services provision and continued learning. However, long-term educational policies and provision need to recognize the diversity and the changing demographics over time. People are not all and always in the same circumstances, nor do they experience the same constraints. Elders today and elders in future may need different support in terms of continued learning. Continued learning for people at old age should therefore take various forms to embrace learning experiences, activities and enjoyment provided by educational, non-educational, social and cultural agencies and institutions – of both a formal and informal kind – within the community in order to achieve the aim of education for all and for life.

### **Lifelong learning for the elderly**

The right to education is not just confined to school age children and working adults who need training and retraining for employment. In fact, learning is for all, where learning must continue throughout life, regardless of age, through provision of both formal and informal learning opportunities in a variety of settings and contexts.

According to Luppi (2009), there are three fundamental premises that underscore the needs for continued learning even in old age. The first is the predisposition to learn in human beings. The capacity to learn distinguishes us from other animals. It begins in infancy, continues through compulsory and post-compulsory periods of formal education and

training, and persists throughout the later years of our lives. Learning is so much a part of us that it becomes a natural instinct for human beings to engage in continued learning to cope with difficult life situations, to meet the demands for survival and development and to allow us to satisfy our needs, including the quest for knowledge and understanding of our own existence.

The second premise that supports later life learning is the life-span perspective (Baltes et al. 1980, cited from Luppi, 2009). This claims that learning is not confined to the early stages of life, but is spread over the whole life span, resulting in continuous development in any age period. In this light, learning takes place at anytime in the course of life, defying the assumption that there is an optimum or peak age for learning that affects an individual's development more than the others (Luppi, 2009).

Third, the final premise is about the central role accorded to the elderly learner and his or her interaction with the learning environment. Learning in old age allows each individual to pursue personal growth, while at the same time, social development through interaction with others. Bringing all the three premises together, lifelong learning is claimed to be a necessity for the elderly to engage in learning simply because they have the natural capacity to learn, the desire to keep learning throughout one's life span and finally the right to learn and interact with others in society for personal growth and social development.

In a similar vein, Ruth et al (1989) claimed that education for elders can help to achieve four main objectives of educational policy. They are: to increase equality, to advance democracy, to improve the welfare of society and the quality of life, to promote international peace and understanding. As attested by Ruth et al (1989), education for the elderly can help to address social inequality by narrowing the gap between the elderly and other age groups in society. It also contributes to the advancement of democracy whereby elders are encouraged to participate in and influence government decisions concerning their lives and environment. Education for elders will also bring about positive outcomes for society by improving the skills and enriching the lives of its citizens to result in improving the welfare of society. The quality of later life is enhanced too through education as elders engage in various forms of learning to help foster a positive self-image and meaningful outlook to life. Finally, international peace and understanding is promoted as a result of intergenerational learning between war and post-war generations who share and learn from each other's perspectives, attitudes and beliefs towards other nations and questions of war and peace.

In summary, inherent in the concept of lifelong learning is the need for personal growth and social development that is not restricted to the early years of life. Rather it entails a

continuous process that spans the entire course of life, regardless of age. Education for the elderly should assume equal importance, if not more, as education for school children and working adults. However, there is always a gap between what is espoused and what actually is happening with lifelong learning for the elderly. In a British report entitled “Learning through Life”, Schuller and Watson (2009) recommended that the UK government redistribute lifelong learning resources so that elder learning could be resourced more effectively and strategically, and argued that at present, older populations are ignored by lifelong learning policy. From this point of view, educational initiatives aimed at the older age group should no longer be considered haphazard, short-term and based on voluntary involvement. Rather, it should be viewed as important and be supported by government policy and provision to allow the aged population to take advantage of a rich panorama of education and learning opportunities as they also have the capacity, resources and the necessity to learn.

### **Lifelong learning policy in Hong Kong**

Hong Kong, because of its colonial ruling by the British for almost a century, has developed into an international city with a capitalist economy and values shaped by what Gouthro (2009) defined as neoliberal influences that emphasize individualization, competition and connections to the marketplace. These neoliberal influences have precipitated into the education sector in Hong Kong where the function of education is construed as the need to ensure Hong Kong’s competitive advantage in the knowledge-based economy (Kennedy, 2004). In order for Hong Kong to ensure and maintain its competitiveness in the knowledge economy, high level skills are required which must be constantly updated through lifelong learning (ibid). The discourse on lifelong learning has become important in Hong Kong’s educational policy and planning since the former British colony became the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of China following the handover of sovereignty from the British to the Communist Chinese Government on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1997. The inaugural Chief Executive of the HKSAR first stated the importance of lifelong learning in his Policy Address in 1997. And in January 1999, the Education Commission, a high-level advisory body on educational policy and planning, steered a comprehensive review of the local education system, placing lifelong learning as the cornerstone of the new education reform, central to its vision, aims and direction. The Education Commission boldly proclaimed in its reform blueprint that ‘the age of lifelong learning has dawned’ and that ‘learning is no longer the prerogative of those aged 6 to 22’ (Education Commission, 1999:15). Besides, lifelong learning is construed as the key to the knowledge-based economy where young people must be willing to strive to improve through continuous learning (ibid: 9). These bold statements about the future goal of Hong Kong education have pointed to the fact that policy makers in Hong Kong are trying to conflate lifelong learning with lifelong earning

(Kennedy, 2004). This is evidenced as the first Chief Executive of Hong Kong expressed in his 2003 Policy Address that Hong Kong must become an innovative knowledge-based economy and through 'training and retraining programmes, the government helps citizens adjust to the demands of economic restructuring' (Tung, 2003: 25). Though using the same rhetoric of lifelong learning, the Hong Kong government is in fact using it to refer to the neoliberal values of learning where competitiveness and economic viability are emphasized. This is different from our earlier claim that lifelong learning should be a necessity for people, regardless of age, ability and background, to engage in simply because they have the natural capacity to learn, the desire to keep learning throughout one's life span and the right to learn and interact with others in society for personal growth and social development.

Political discourse under the theme of lifelong learning for economic growth and competitiveness has gathered heat and momentum during the first few years since the handover of sovereignty from the British to the Chinese government. The transitional period, marked by the watershed development in policies pre- and post-1997 in Hong Kong, is conceived by Scott (1999) as an important attempt by an executive-led local administration to demonstrate 'performance legitimacy' through major political reforms. In his first Policy Address in 1997, the new Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) made clear his intention to initiate major policy reforms in education, as well as in housing and social welfare. It is apt for Lau (2002: ix) to point out that the Chief Executive is in fact trying to launch 'in rapid succession a large number of bold initiatives on various fronts with the purpose of "re-inventing" Hong Kong in a short period of time.' As a result, a major reform on education was carried out with lifelong learning as the major theme and focus. Lifelong learning was focused because Hong Kong realizes that knowledge is a major driver of economic development and for social and personal development. It is here apparent that lifelong learning is advocated for its economic value and contribution to the building of a thriving economy which is of utmost importance for the new Hong Kong SAR government to be seen capable of sustaining fast economic growth, prosperity and stability for Hong Kong in the post-colonial era.

There is no doubt that the post-1997 policies and advocacy for lifelong education will have a broad, popular appeal as the importance of education for social mobility, status and career advancement among people in the Chinese culture is well supported in the literature (for example, Lee 1996; Pratt et al., 1999). Hence, political support and consensus have been generally attained for the new HKSAR government to help citizens to adjust to the demands of economic restructuring where continuous learning seems to hold a lot of promises (Kennedy, 2004).

Although lifelong learning is used mainly as the foundation and guiding principle for educational reforms in the formal schooling and higher education systems in Hong Kong, its impact has also precipitated to the less core areas of continuing education for people outside the formal education structure. In June 2002, a \$5 billion Continuing Education Fund was set up to encourage people between 18 and 60 years of age to pursue continuing education in areas identified to be instrumental to the economic future of Hong Kong. These areas include financial services, tourism, logistics and China business, language, design and interpersonal/intrapersonal skills for the workplace (Hong Kong Government Yearbook, 2002). And from September 2007, the upper age limit of eligible applicants was lifted from 60 to 65 to enable more learners, in particular older learners, to enjoy the fund's financial subsidy. Applicants can apply for up to HK\$10,000 to pursue continuing education in the aforementioned areas. Since then, education for older adults has apparently moved closer to the centre of the policy agenda in Hong Kong (Kennedy, 2004), an extension from education and vocational training for the working age population to adult continuing education as a kind of welfare for the post-work population. It is against this backdrop of the government's political commitment to lifelong learning that the planning and development of policies and provisions for learning by and for elders in Hong Kong began to emerge and were concomitantly crafted with an aim to increase education opportunities for all.

### **Elder learning policy and practice in Hong Kong**

The Hong Kong government endorses the World Health Organization (WHO)'s Active Ageing Policy Framework in which active ageing is defined as 'the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age' (WHO, 2002). The government believes that participation in learning is vital to active ageing and will bring benefits to the elderly to help improve their health and ability to cope with challenges presented by old age. On a variety of occasions, including in policy papers and reports, speeches and public addresses by senior officials concerned, the government has alluded to the importance of lifelong learning for active ageing. For example, in the *Report on Healthy Ageing* (2001) by the Hong Kong Elderly Commission, lifelong learning by the elderly has been identified as one of the four strategic directions for promoting active and healthy ageing among elders in Hong Kong. Also, at the commencement ceremony of the Elder Academy 2008-09 officiated by the Chief Executive, the Secretary for Labour and Welfare emphasized that pursuing continuous learning enabled elders to keep pace with the times, take part in community service and continue to contribute to society. More recently, the Financial Secretary announced in his *Budget 2009-10* the allocation of \$10 million to set up the Elder Academy Development Foundation

to aim at supporting learning and participation by elders in all sorts of formal and informal educational programmes and activities.

According to the Elderly Commission of Hong Kong, elder learning programmes first emerged in the late 1980s, with most of them organized by non-government organizations (NGOs). This is confirmed by Leung et al. (2005) who noted that learning for older persons in Hong Kong started in 1984. Learning opportunities were mainly provided by elderly care centres and social services organizations, and the courses offered were non-credit bearing and mostly personal development in nature (Zhang & Ha, 2001). Examples of these courses include Basic Computer Usage for the Elderly, Elementary English, Chinese Calligraphy, Water and Ink Painting, Dancing and Tai Chi lessons, etc.

It was also commented by Lee & Chan (2002) that Hong Kong adopted a non-formal approach to elder learning for its elderly citizens in the 1990s. But this changed after the establishment of the Elderly Commission (EC) in 1997. The government since then has taken on a more coordinated approach to elderly policy development with the EC tasked to provide advice on policies and programmes to meet the challenges brought about by an ageing population. As a result, the policy development for elderly education in Hong Kong can be conceptualized as two distinct stages. Stage 1 is pre-1997 and before the establishment of the Elderly Commission, which is characterized by the non-formal approach to elder learning. Stage 2 is post-1997 and after the formation of the EC, where continued learning is conceived as an integral part of healthy ageing and is encouraged by the government in the forms of social campaigns, initiatives and even funding support to providers. Such water-shed development in policies and provisions for elder learning is coincidentally marked by the retrocession to China and the establishment of the Hong Kong Elderly Commission in 1997.

A series of surveys conducted by the School of Professional and Continuing Education of The University of Hong Kong shows a rising trend for elders to participate in learning with the percentages of people aged 60-64 participating in continuing education increasing from 3% in 2003 to 12% in 2005 (HKU-SPACE, 2006). These figures, however, represent just the tip of the iceberg and the demand for elder learning should be ever increasing as the ageing population grows. In response to the rising trend and increasing demand for learning opportunities among the elderly, the Hong Kong government, through the Elderly Commission, set up the "Elder Academy (EA) Scheme" in 2007. The scheme is a significant development launched by the Commission and the Labour and Welfare Bureau in early 2007. With the support of schools and NGOs, 78 elder academies were initially set up in various districts and were well received by the elderly. To date, the network has expanded to include more than 100 EAs in schools and NGOs, plus 7 EAs in tertiary institutions. Through the EA scheme, the government

has been proactive in providing funding to support the development and provision of education and intergenerational programmes for the elderly. As a result, many initiatives in the form of publicly provided programmes exist, some charging nominal fees, from which elders can choose to learn. Despite the availability of government funding, the amount is usually small and non-recurrent, which is barely enough to cover the costs for basic operation and management. There are no earmarked and recurrent funds set aside for EAs to sustain their intentions of developing and providing various programmes for elders. As a result, this sector of educational provision still remains largely sporadic, intermittent and based on voluntary participation from both the organization and the elder learner.

By way of the Elder Academy Scheme, the government has invited interested education organizations to partner with local volunteer organizations and offer their school campuses for the establishment of elder academies. In the *Application Guidelines of the Elder Academy – Pilot Elder Learning Scheme* issued by the Elderly Commission (2007), elder academies are expected to achieve seven objectives:

1. To promote lifelong learning by encouraging elders to make best use of their time and to keep pace with society through acquiring new knowledge and learning new skills.
2. To maintain healthy physical and mental well-being by enhancing their sense of achievement and self-confidence through learning.
3. To foster a sense of worthiness in elders by offering a platform for elders to share knowledge, demonstrate creativity, serve the community and continue to make contribution to society.
4. To optimize existing resources through partnerships with schools which are equipped with the requisite resources and facilities for learning that can take place after school hours and at weekends.
5. To promote integration between the elders and the young by engaging them in learning activities for intergenerational harmony and rapport.
6. To strengthen civic education by having uniformed groups such as the Scout Association to offer volunteer services to the elders to promote civic education and to foster community spirit.

7. To promote cross-sectoral harmony through collaboration among schools, tertiary institutions and NGOs including District Elderly Community Centres and Neighbourhood Elderly Centres.

The approach of operating an elder academy, according to the *Application Guidelines*, is ‘a self-help form of learning programme in Hong Kong’. The Elder Academy Scheme is conceived as a territory-wide, non-accredited school-based elder learning scheme formed by a network of providers, who provide a variety of programmes and activities designed for self-access by older learners. The plan is to establish one elder academy in each of the 19 districts in Hong Kong. Through joining the scheme, participating schools and organizations will receive a lump sum grant as seed money to establish elder academies, which will operate on a self-financing basis, charging a fee that is affordable for elders who will share part of the cost for financing the scheme. Most of the courses run by elder academies are targeting elders aged 60 and above and are informal in nature in terms of both content and mode of study. Many courses are mainly interest courses and participation is usually part-time and voluntary. However, courses or programmes for elders run by elder academies in local universities or tertiary institutions are linked to their regular offerings, which allow the elder learners to enroll in undergraduate courses as auditing students who do not take part in any assessment and do not earn credits for the degree award.

In the scheme, the Elderly Commission and the Labour and Welfare Bureau act as coordinators to encourage cross-sectoral collaboration among schools, non-government organizations (NGOs), tertiary institutions and even a radio broadcaster to work together to promote elder learning. With respect to curricula, the range of offerings can include a variety of both compulsory and elective courses tailored to meet the diverse needs, interests and abilities of elders, with the aim to help raise their standard of living by building up their capability for self-care and adjusting to life in old age. As a result, a wide range of courses are made available, including academic studies and leisure pursuits such as arts, craft, and sports. Access to these courses should be barrier-free with no entry requirements and examinations. Upon completion of the study programmes offered by any approved academy, elder learners will be awarded certificates by the Elderly Commission and a graduation ceremony will be held to congratulate their success.

### **The ‘Network Approach’ to elder learning**

The growing network of more than 100 elder academies in different parts of Hong Kong offers a suite of educational opportunities, plus facilities and meeting places for the elderly. The network is coordinated by the Hong Kong Elderly Commission with policy and administrative support from the government’s Labour and Welfare Bureau, both of which are not directly

involved in the provision of educational opportunities and services to the elderly. Instead they provide funding to educational institutions, NGOs, and schools, and encourage them to offer a diverse range of course and learning activities to the elderly on a not-for-profit basis. However, such Elder Academy network, though coordinated and instigated by the government, will not replace the existing open market model of informal learning for the elderly currently offered by social elderly centres and many associations or bodies that provide continuing education for elders in keeping with their social service goal of promoting active ageing and enhancing quality of life as people age.

Outside of Hong Kong, there exists a plethora of learning opportunities for the elderly, which take a variety of forms – formal, informal, or non-formal; and are provided and organized by different providers, including the government, tertiary institutions, schools, NGOs such as social service agencies, elderly community centres, as well as by the elders themselves. There are generally two major forms of elder learning in Europe with its early development dating back to the 1970s when the University of the Third Age (U3A) was founded in Toulouse, France, with the aim of promoting learning in old age. Because of its French origin, this is better known as the French model (Swindell and Thompson, 1995), which requires that U3As be associated with traditional university systems. Under the French model, the programmes offered vary widely in content and mode, but usually include lectures and negotiated access to regular university courses, other learning activities, and campus facilities. Funding also varies, ranging from university funding, some financial support from the local government, and donations to fees paid by U3A members themselves. The idea of U3A later spread to England in 1981, where it was first established in association with Cambridge University (ibid). However, the concept soon changed with the formation of independent U3As based on local communities where courses were conducted by the members themselves. The self-help approach of the British model is characterized by minimal membership fees, accessible classes in community halls, libraries, and private homes, flexible timetables with negotiable curricula and teaching styles, wide course variety and no examinations or entrance requirements. Each U3A is independent and run by its own elected management committee with no government funding (ibid). This has advantages and disadvantages, one of the latter being that learning opportunities are restricted to the expertise of each individual group.

Other examples of elder learning opportunities include a church project for creative work by older persons in a unique setting (Luckie, 2005), a programme designed to involve retired persons in focused civic projects (Eisen, 2005), journal writing for older learners (Brady and Sky, 2003), increased study opportunities in universities (Butler, 2005), intergenerational programmes for native American elders to teach youngsters ancient arts (Henkin, 2007), and opportunities for elementary and secondary schooling for the elderly in Japan (Young and

Rosenberg, 2006). These are just a few examples cited in Wolf (2009) to illustrate what could be made available to elders with respect to continued learning. There is, in fact, no one model, no one particular provider, and no one formula for success. What is noteworthy is the proliferation of similar elder learning opportunities worldwide as the world population is ageing fast.

The model of a network of Elder Academies set up in many parts of Hong Kong is claimed to be unique by the Elderly Commission, which has stated on its official website that it is committed to a “school-based Elder Academy Scheme with Hong Kong characteristics” (Elderly Commission of Hong Kong). It encourages elders to “continue learning so as to maintain their physical and mental well-being, foster a sense of worthiness,” and promotes intergenerational harmony, civic education and cross-sectoral collaboration through government coordination with schools, tertiary institutions, and NGOs by providing some financial support for course offerings. A cross-sectoral collaborative approach of this kind with Hong Kong characteristics sets itself apart from many common approaches to the organizing of elder learning in other parts of the world.

The Elder Academy network in Hong Kong, claimed to be distinct and unique with Hong Kong characteristics, requires co-investment and joint engagement between the government and various stakeholders, forming a network with a range of schools, institutions and organizations, and developing a multiplicity of offerings, some traditional, some innovatory, some formal, and some informal. In order for the network to work effectively, there is a need for clearly defined and effective coordination of interaction, connection and co-operation among and between the wide ranges of providers in such a network of educational provision. There is also a need for support and arrangements for cross sector linkages, easy credit transfer, recognition of prior learning across sectors and boundaries. The idea of networks, as conceived by Chapman (2006), is distinct from traditional forms of educational organizations and systems, in which hierarchical structures and organizational approaches are most often adopted. The notion of “network,” however, stresses the idea of “community” as the common element and principle of connection among all relevant stakeholders including the government, schools, institutions, organizations, and the participants. Networks, because of cross-sectoral collaboration, have the potential to be more supportive, co-operative, and cost-effective. There is also the opportunity for shared and dispersed leadership and responsibility, drawing on resources and creative efforts in the community beyond those primarily initiated by the government. The relevance of “networks” as a construct and strategy for the coordination and operationalization of elder learning in Hong Kong is evident in the significant growth and development of a network with over 100 Elder Academies established within a period as short as three years since July 2007.

Though ideal such Elder Academy network might seem, it is not without criticisms. The current funding scheme, which is small and non-recurrent, is largely neoliberal in its orientation with emphasis on competition among educational providers and the important role played by the market. Under the EA scheme, the rules of the market continue to dominate where providers operate largely on a self-financing basis, charging a fee that is acceptable to the older learners' market and offering programmes and courses that meet the market needs and wants. In this operational mode, there is a fundamental tension between a commitment to communitarian values which elder learning provision is supposed to be about, on the one hand, and competition among providers in the marketplace, on the other. In a bid to stay competitive or at least viable in the marketplace, elder learning providers value what is immediately needed in the market more than other kinds of knowledge and skills that may be useful in the long run. As a result, providers are facing the dilemma of promoting community-based forms of elder learning that can improve overall quality of life on one hand, and offering learning opportunities that can be readily measured by their market and practical economic values, on the other.

By way of its funding model, the Elder Academy (EA) scheme intends not to distinguish between the private and public sectors of elder learning provision. Both private and public providers can compete equally for government funding and support and they are left to freely plan and organize learning opportunities for elders who assume personal responsibility for making decisions about their life and learning experiences. Before the formation of the Elder Academy network in 2007, elderly education used to take place mainly in the private sector as project initiatives undertaken by schools, NGOs, social service agencies on a voluntary basis. This phenomenon continues even after the EA scheme was established where the government did not replace the private sector with public provision. The two sectors coexist alongside each other to provide a wide array of learning opportunities to elders, resulting in a thriving and flourishing combined sector of elderly education provision in Hong Kong. The public/private divide is blurred as the private is operative in the public sphere, and vice versa, the public is operative in the private sector. The interdependence and interrelatedness of the two spheres conflate private marketplace values with public concerns, minimizing and marginalizing the social responsibility of the government and public institutions to create a more supportive and inclusive framework for lifelong learning by senior adults in Hong Kong.

### **Need for policy review and future research**

By the work of the Elderly Commission and its sprawling network of Elder Academies across the territory, the Hong Kong government has, in fact, committed policies and provided financial support, albeit small, to help providers run courses and programmes for the elders.

Through the Elder Academy network, resources are provided and policies are put in place to encourage elderly education provision to benefit all involved. However, there is limited information as to the effectiveness and impact of such policy and practice on stakeholders. There is a need for research and evaluation to critically review the effectiveness and adequacy of provisions for older adults in the Elder Academies in schools, NGOs and universities in Hong Kong. Data and views are necessary from the perspectives of policy makers, service providers and elderly learners to evaluate how effective the policies have been in encouraging older adults to engage in continued learning, and to examine why (or why not) elders enroll in the programmes.

A culture of research and evaluation is needed in the interest of developing strong, effective and progressive policy and practice in promoting elder learning in Hong Kong, focusing on the following areas for future conceptual, analytical and empirical enquiry:

- Evaluation of whether current organizational, administrative and financial arrangements through the Elder Academy Scheme are adequate as means of extending and promoting the ideal of lifelong learning for all;
- Stocktaking of existing offerings for elder learning, examining whether they foster or inhibit effective linkages, promote or hinder effectiveness and facilitate participation for and by senior adults in learning;
- Curriculum analysis and evaluation of existing learning provision as a basis for future planning and resource allocation;
- Evaluation to improve the network approach to make it more coherent and structured with considerations of quality, standards, and expected learning outcomes;
- Investigating ways to sustain creative efforts and help mobilize public and private resources to build learning communities for elders by different sectors;
- Exploring multi-mode delivery methods of teaching and learning to overcome isolation and difficulties for elders to attend classes;
- Addressing barriers to learning by elders and understanding why and why not elders enroll in programmes;
- Studying learning practices, processes and provisions, drawing on present good practices for sharing among providers, schools, universities, NGOs, and elder learners themselves.

## **Conclusion**

The Elder Academy (EA) network in Hong Kong that has combined efforts and resources from both the private and public sectors is claimed to have pooled resources and put to optimal use expertise and skills to benefit all who are involved. By way of its funding and policy support, the EA scheme encourages both private and public providers to either

continue or initiate the offering of learning opportunities that suit the needs and interests of elders. Due to their longer presence dating back in the 1980s, private providers constitute the majority of EAs within the network. They have been active over the last few decades in providing a variety of learning opportunities that are popular with the elderly community in Hong Kong. When provision is vested largely in the private sector, issues of elder learning do not become issues of public debate, thus undermining the potential for communicative action that might lead to social change. For the required social change to happen, it needs a shift from private decisions or negotiations of elder learning to public action for more inclusive and supportive learning opportunities and environments for elders. There is also a need for a shift from the informal sphere to the formal arenas of provision where elder learning is seen as a responsibility of 'public' institutions such as the university or government to explore policies and programmes to address elder learning issues that have long been treated as individualized concerns to be dealt with by private organizations or providers through competition in the marketplace.

Notwithstanding the fact that the establishment of the Elder Academy network is a significant step forward in the right direction towards the support and provision of elder learning, many challenges still need to be addressed to create more inclusive and supportive learning environments for elders. Current discourses in lifelong learning for elders under the ambit of the EA network are shaped by a neoliberal agenda where competition among providers is emphasized due to the lack of stable and sustainable funding and support from the government through the EA scheme. There is a need of the Hong Kong government to challenge the narrowness of a competitive, market-based agenda for elder learning and to put in place policies and programmes that support lifelong learning as a necessity for people, regardless of age, ability and background, to engage in simply because they have the natural capacity to learn, the desire to keep learning throughout one's lifespan and the right to learn and interact with others in society for personal growth and social development. Only then will elders' voices be heard. And only then will the diverse needs and interests of elder learners be met to a fuller extent.

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