

# Helping the old stay active

IF Universiti Putra Malaysia's Gerontology Institute (GI) got its way, Malaysian drivers would be greeted by friendly "grannies" at toll booths, instead of the young school-leavers currently in service.

"That is one example of how we can utilise a resource we have – older persons – effectively. Currently, once they retire, their working lives are over," opines the institute's director, Assoc Prof Dr Tengku Aizan Hamid.

Like many countries in the world, low fertility, low mortality and high life expectancy have resulted in a higher ageing population in Malaysian society.

Consequently, the Government has put in place measures to meet the needs of the ageing population, including the National Policy for the Elderly (NPE) 1995; the National Advisory and Consultative Council for the Elderly; and the ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development) Programme of Action.

However, there is still a need for support from other parties in improving the social status, dignity and well being of older Malaysians. That is where GI comes in.

Established in 2002, the institute was incepted to conduct and promote interdisciplinary research on old age and ageing.

"The elderly needed to be helped to help themselves," says Dr Tengku Aizan.

"Hence, we are looking at measures to empower the elderly to be financially independent as well as keep their minds and bodies agile."

To achieve this, the institute has engaged in various clinical and outreach efforts, she shares, as well as community involvement and advocacy and collaboration with international centres in gerontology, geriatric medicine and gerontechnology.

Programmes and activities are divided into five broad themes – healthy and productive ageing; family dynamic and inter-generational relationship; cross-cultural psychosocial gerontology; financial well-being and housing; and

improvement in competencies of older persons.

## Successful project

The Lifelong Learning Initiative for the Elderly (LLIFE) programme is jointly organised by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), New Era College, and the Eagle's Nest Computer and Community Centre (ENCC), Kajang, Selangor.

Says Dr Tengku Aizan: "The strategy is to introduce activities which facilitate the sharing of life experiences, building of knowledge and acquisition of new skills in later life."

The three-month programme is the third phase of the *Promoting and Active and Productive Ageing* project, which is funded by the UNFPA and the Malaysian Government. It is based on the findings of a survey on 705 residents of Kajang, Selangor, aged 50 years and over.

As the study reveals, 42.5% of the respondents are financially self-dependent while 43.1% depend on their children for income. A total of 13.4% are dependant on their spouses (12.1%), siblings (0.6%) and relatives (0.7%) while 0.3% rely on welfare.

According to the survey, 37.5% of the respondents would like to be employed.

The biggest reason given is financial (64.9%). Up to 18.9% cited boredom while 6.3% felt they could still contribute to the economy.

To provide employment opportunities for the aged, Dr Tengku Aizan points out that a review of the employment structure is essential.

"The Government and the private sector should allow flexi-work hours, as practised in certain countries, to allow the elderly to return to work or provide housebound work for them," she says.

Providing opportunities for retraining in a diverse range of areas, as covered by the LLIFE programme, is equally important, she stresses.

"Many people think that computer skills are all that the elderly need. That is not true. That is why we conducted a survey to look at their different needs and interests."

A survey of older Kajang residents aged 50 years and over showed that if given a choice, 37.5% would like to be employed.

## Reasons why they want to work

<i>Reasons</i>	<i>%</i>
Financial (livelihood & helping out spouse, children or family)	64.9
Bored (to pass time or for fun)	18.9
Ability (still young and able to work)	6.3
Other reasons	9.9

## Reasons why they don't want to work

<i>Reasons</i>	<i>%</i>
Retired (stopped work due to age & time to rest)	43.1
Poor health & disability	28.8
Never worked (e.g. housewife)	14.4
Have pension or supported by family	6.2
Not allowed to work by family	6.2
Other reasons	1.3



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Source: Gerontology Institute, UPM