

The golden years

They can have lots of fun rekindling old interests, picking up new skills and making friends. For senior citizens prepared to make the effort, there is indeed life after retirement.

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LEARNT something new!" declares Lifelong Learning Initiative for the Elderly (LLIFE) programme participant Chee Yin Peng, 64.

"The brains of elderly people are shrinking but that doesn't affect our memory.

"And do you know that there is a correct method for swallowing pills? You should look down, not lift up your head, when you swallow."

Chee, who took the elective on Health and Exercise, was the picture of happiness, clad in her graduation gown and surrounded by her children and grandchild who had come from Singapore to attend her LLIFE graduation.

She was not the only one. Others stood near her, equally proud of their achievements, showing off their tablecloths or painted glasses outside the convocation hall or singing renditions of *You Are My Sunshine* and *Love Me Tender* on stage.

LLIFE was a three-month course held from May to July in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), with no assignments, exams or theses.

Classes were held twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, for three hours at a time, teaching skills like dancing the *cha cha*, glass painting, gardening and *tai qi*.

The core modules included topics such as using computers and the Internet, managing finances, volunteerism and entrepreneurship.

Participants also chose from four electives - Arts and Craft, Language and Performing Arts, Living Skills, and Health and Exercise.

"We did a survey among the elderly and asked what their interests were," says UPM Gerontology Institute (GI) director Assoc Prof Dr Tengku Aizan Hamid. "We then developed the modules from the feedback."

Dr Sharifah Norazizan Syed Abdul Rashid, who taught fundraising and social networking, points out that these courses for the elderly are different from other university courses.

"We had someone from a choir come in to teach singing and a dancer to teach simple dance steps. Of course, no salsa or anything like that," she laughs.

"Classes were a two-way communica-



"They used to attend our graduations; now we attend theirs," says Mohd Raffiq Yusrizal Ashraf (right) as he congratulates Mariam and Baharuddin (in gowns). Sharing in the joy is his brother Yusrizal Ashraf (left).

tion; students were actively involved while lecturers were mainly facilitators," she says.

To mark the culmination of three months of lectures and practical work, the 84 participants attended a "graduation" ceremony to receive their certificates of participation and merit.

Tailored to needs

The smiles and laughter during graduation were proof of the participants' satisfaction.

"The course was very, very good. I think everyone should attend," says participant L. Mano Krishnan, 65, who learnt a lot about gardening from the Living Skills elective he signed up for.

"I have done planting before but nothing seemed to grow.

"In this class, I learnt about soil, how to dig the ground and care for plants. After this, I am going to try and plant flowers in my garden."

He was not too keen on courses like learning how to buy electrical items or personal grooming, but feels courses on tailoring, gardening and cooking are helpful.

Overall, the response to the LLIFE programme has been overwhelmingly positive. Some participants are even planning to form groups to learn other things.

"An unexpected bonus is the sense of unity and friendships formed among participants who are now even more motivated to acquire new skills," says Dr Tengku Aizan. "Some are forming new, informal groups to learn cooking or horticulture, and want UPM to provide instructors."

Fun and friends

Participant Sara Chiew Mei Lin, 57, reveals that the course has rekindled her interest in art and craft.

"All of us enjoyed the course. We did things we had not done before, like glass painting," she says.

"It's also great to be making new friends, some of them from the same neighbourhood.

"Another lady and I are interested in water colour painting, especially that done with the Chinese brush; we are getting a few others to form a class so that the instructors can come and teach us."

"It is a good way to fill time after retirement," says UPM vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Nik Mustapha Raja Abdullah.

"Many have been working for 30 to 40 years, and suddenly find themselves at a loose end. This is a way to avoid falling into depression."

The motivation to learn probably



Can you see the chest rise and fall? LLIFE programme participants learning to conduct cardio-pulmonary resuscitation.



Agatha Siew Chin Thai (left), 59, showing off the decorative tablecloth she made in the Living Skills class to her instructor Siow Yin Ngoh.



Hey, we did it! The joyous LLIFE programme participants posing for a photograph after receiving their certificates at the 'graduation' ceremony in UPM.

»Senior citizens have the potential to contribute to the country's economy; however, this potential needs to be tapped«

PROF DATUK DR NIK MUSTAPHA RAJA ABDULLAH



stems from the desire to contribute, even after retiring.

Mano Krishnan, who was previously in the Public Works Department, has been trying to re-enter the workforce without much success.

"I applied to a few companies but there were no replies," he says.

"If anyone offers me a job related to civil engineering, I will take it."

Chiew also encounters difficulties finding a job.

"I have been trying to get a part-time job but most companies seem to want full-time employees."

Dawn of new era?

Despite the success of the LLIFE programme, Dr Tengku Aizan says the institute's focus is research, so UPM may need to rope in non-government organisations and other bodies to help organise similar programmes in the future.

"We intend to focus more on research," she says. "For us, this programme is just an exposure to what retirees can do.

"We have gotten calls from as far away as Ipoh to develop these programmes, so our role is to connect participants with the right people."

The institute hopes to launch the University of the Third Age (U3A) where senior citizens can pick up skills anytime they like, whether it is to enrich their knowledge or to enable them to contribute to the economy via re-employment or starting up businesses.

According to the United Nations, an ageing nation has 10% or more of its population aged 60 and above. Malaysia is expected to have 15% of its population fall into this age group in 2035.

"Senior citizens have the potential to contribute to the country's economy; however, this potential needs to be tapped," says Prof Nik Mustapha.

GI research officer Chai Sen Tyng says that GI intends to come up with a pro-



That's the way we do it, one finger at a time! LLIFE programme participants Hong Kim Lean (left) and A. Easwary Alahakone learning how to use the computer.

gramme that combines the best from the French and British models of lifelong learning — the former provides certification while the latter does not — to allow participants to choose any course they want over any period of time and attend one graduation in a year.

"The U3A is not a university as it does not confer degrees," says Chai, adding that it is a new concept in Malaysia.

Dr Sharifah reveals that recognition is important to senior citizens.

"They want to live fulfilled lives and not just stay at home; it's about self-esteem and self-image," she says.

"These people want to be recognised by the university because many did not have that opportunity when they were young."

Mohd Raffiq Baharuddin, 28, whose parents Baharuddin Abdullah, 76, and Mariam Ibrahim, 53, participated in the LLIFE programme, agrees that it has given his parents a new sense of achievement.

"They come back and tell us, 'This is a new recipe we learnt today' and cook for us," he says, adding that he and his brother, Universiti Malaysia and UPM graduates respectively, were proud of their parents.

"They used to attend our graduations; now we attend theirs."

□ For more information about the LLIFE programme, call Dr Tengku Aizan at 03-8947 2750.



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