

**Learning Needs and Preferences of
Members of
Multi-service Centers for Elderly
and
Social Centers for Elderly**

Executive Summary

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I. Introduction

This purpose of this research study is to find out the learning needs and preferences, as well as deterrent to learning, of members of multi-service centers for the elderly (ME) and social centers for the elderly (SE).

2. The study comprises a survey of 2,659 members from 18 MEs and 53 SEs and a series of five focus group discussions and one-in-depth interview, with a total of 28 members, service users and volunteers of MEs and SEs (all between 55 to 60 years old) participating. The fieldwork of both the survey and the focus group discussions were carried out in May and June 2001.

3. The study focuses on organized educational activities that the elderly participate in. The areas having been explored include participation patterns, learning needs (as reflected by subject interests and motivations to learn), deterrents to learning, learning preferences, and specific educational issues related to 55 to 60 years old members.

II. Survey Findings

A. Participation

4. The proportion of members intending to take courses in the coming year was similar to the participation rates in the past.

- About 30% of members took at least one course during the period from September 2000 to May 2001.
- About 30% of members said they would take at least one course in the coming year (starting from June 2001), while another 7% said 'maybe'.

5. Members of different gender, age and educational attainment were different in their likelihood to take courses in the coming year.

- Female members were expected to be 1.6 times more likely than male members in the same age and educational group to consider taking courses.
- Younger members (i.e., aged 55 to 74) were expected to be 2.6 times more likely than older members (i.e., aged 75 and over) in the same gender and educational group to consider taking courses.
- Better-educated members (i.e., with at least some years of primary education) were expected to be 2.5 times more likely than uneducated members (i.e., with no formal education or only kindergarten education) in the same gender and age group to consider taking courses.

B. Subject Interests

6. In terms of both relative popularity and proportion of respondents, there was not much difference in learners' and would-be learners' subject interests by gender, by age or by educational attainment.

- Overall, the top five categories of subjects interests cited by learners and would-be learners were: 'basic literacy' (15% of subject interests cited), 'computer application' (15%), 'languages' (13%), 'sports / exercise' (13%) and 'music / singing' (12%).
- The more noticeable exceptions were the difference by gender in 'computer application' (23% for male vs. 12% for female) and in 'basic literacy' (8% for male vs. 17% for female).

7. Relatively few learners / would-be learners would be interested in taking vocational courses (14%) or courses leading to formal academic qualifications (17%).

C. Motivations

8. In terms of relative importance of reasons for considering taking courses, there was not much difference in learners' and would-be learners' motivations by gender, by age or by educational attainment.

- The average number of motivations cited was 7.0.
- Overall, the top five reasons of learners and would-be learners for considering taking courses were: "widen one's social circle / meet new friends" (87% citing it), 'learn new things and knowledge' (80%), 'be occupied mentally and emotionally' (80%), 'have better understanding of society' (78%) and 'keep abreast of society / do not want to fall behind' (77%).

9. The differences between learners and would-be learners of different gender, of different age and of different educational attainment were more noticeable in terms of proportion of respondents citing the motivations.

10. Differences in motivation between male and female learners / would-be learners, when age and educational attainment were taken into account, included:

- Female learners / would-be learners were expected to be 1.9 times more likely than male learners / would-be learners in the same age and educational attainment group to cite "widen one's social circle / meet new friends" as a motivation.
- Young female learners / would-be learners were expected to be 1.5 times more likely than young male learners to cite 'learn new things and knowledge as a motivation.

- Uneducated female learners / would-be learners were expected to be 4.0 times more likely than uneducated male learners to cite ‘cope with daily needs and problems’ as a motivation.

11. Differences in motivations between younger and older learners / would-be learners, when gender and educational attainment were taken into account, included:

- Younger learners / would-be learners were expected to be 1.5 times more likely than male learners / would learners in the same gender and educational attainment group to cite “widen one’s social circle / meet new friends” as a motivation.
- Younger female learners / would-be learners were expected to be 1.9 times more likely than older female learners / would-be learners in the same educational attainment group to cite ‘learn new things and knowledge’ as a motivation.
- Younger learners / would-be learners were expected to be 1.7 times more likely than older learners / would-be learners in the same educational attainment groups to cite ‘have better understanding of society’ as a motivation.
- Younger learners / would-be learners were expected to be 1.6 times more likely than older learners / would-be learners to cite ‘keep abreast of society / do not want to fall behind’ as a motivation.

12. Differences in motivations between uneducated and better educated learners / would-be learners, when gender and age were taken into account, included:

- Better-educated learners / would-be learners were expected to be 1.7 times more likely than uneducated learners / would-be learners in the same age and gender group to cite “widen one’s social circle / meet new friends” or ‘learn new things and knowledge’ as a motivation.
- Better-educated learners / would-be learners were expected to be 1.7 times more likely than uneducated learners / would-be learners in the same age group to cite ‘have better understanding of society’ as a motivation.
- On the other hand, uneducated female learners / would-be learners were expected to be 1.5 more likely than educated female learners / would be learners to cite ‘cope with daily needs and problems’ as a motivation.

D. Deterrents

13. In terms of relative importance of reasons for not taking courses, there was not much difference in non-learners’ deterrents by gender, by age or by educational attainment.

- The average number of deterrents cited was 5.0.
- The top five reasons of non-learners for not taking courses were: ‘too old to learn’ (76%), ‘not good at learning’ (64%), ‘health problems, disabilities or fatigue’ (62%), ‘nothing I want or need to learn’ (58%) and ‘do not like learning’ (47%).

14. The differences between non-learners of different gender, of different age and of different educational attainment were more noticeable in terms of proportion of respondents citing the deterrents.

15. Of the top five deterrents, only ‘nothing I need or want to learn’ exhibited significant difference between male and female non-learners when age and educational attainment were taken into account. Of the other more important deterrents, significant differences existed in ‘be occupied by work or domestic chores’ and ‘be occupied by other leisure activities’.

- Male non-learners were 1.6 times more likely than female non-learners in the same educational attainment group to cite ‘nothing I want or need to learn’ as a deterrent.
- Younger female non-learners were expected to be 3.0 times more likely than younger male non-learners to cite ‘be occupied by work or domestic chores’ as a deterrent. Of older non-learners, females were expected to be 1.7 times more likely than males to cite it as a deterrent.
- On the other hand, male non-learners were expected to be 1.4 times more likely than female non-learners in the same age group to cite ‘be occupied by other leisure activities’ as a deterrent.

16. Differences in deterrents between younger and older non-learners, when gender and educational attainment were taken into account, included:

- Older non-learners were expected to be 2.9 times more likely than younger non-learners in the same educational attainment group to cite ‘too old to learn’ as a deterrent.
- Older non-learners were expected to be 1.9 times more likely than younger non-learners to cite ‘health problems, disabilities or fatigue’ as a deterrent.
- Older non-learners were expected to be 1.4 times more likely than younger non-learners in the same educational attainment group to cite ‘do not like learning’ as a deterrent.
- On the other hand, younger male non-learners were expected to be 1.5 times more likely than older male non-learners to cite ‘be occupied by work or domestic chores’ as a deterrent. Younger female non-learners were expected to be 2.7 times more likely than older female non-learners to cite it as a deterrent.

- Younger non-learners were expected to be 1.5 times more likely than older non-learners in the same gender group to cite ‘be occupied by other leisure activities’ as a deterrent.

17. Differences in deterrents between uneducated and better older learners / would-be learners, when gender and educational attainment were taken into account, included:

- Uneducated non-learners were expected to be 2.0 times more likely than better-educated non-learners in the same age group to cite ‘too old to learn’ as a deterrent.
- Uneducated non-learners were expected to be 2.8 times more likely than better-educated non-learners to cite ‘not good at learning’ as a deterrent.
- Uneducated non-learners were expected to be 1.3 times more likely than educated non-learners in the same gender group to cite ‘nothing I want or need to learn’ as a deterrent.
- Uneducated non-learners were expected to be 2.0 times more likely than educated non-learners in the same age group to cite ‘do not like learning’ as a deterrent.

E. Preferences

18. Learners / would-be learners seemed to have overwhelming preferences in ways of learning and institutions offering courses. As for class time, age segregation and maximum amount willing to pay, their preferences were more diverse.

- ‘Classroom lecture’ (80%) and ‘ME/SE courses’ (96%) are most preferred.
- They also preferred to have ‘weekday morning’ (61%) or ‘weekday afternoon’ (41%) classes.
- In regard of the issue of age-segregated classes, the proportions were rather even among ‘elderly only’ (37%), ‘no age limit’ (29%) and ‘does not matter’ (35%).
- Most were willing to pay up to ‘\$50 maximum’ (41%) for an 8-hour courses, while a similar proportion (39%) of them were willing to pay a maximum of ‘\$51-\$200’ for such a course.

III. Focus Group Findings

19. Our focus group participants were members, volunteers or service users of MEs and SEs. A majority of them took classes offered by their elderly centers. Their

experience and views as expressed in the discussions are consistent with the survey findings and are summarized below.

A. Comparing Past and Present Learning

20. Reasons of focus group participants for undertaking education when young were mainly career-oriented. Reasons for education now were more varied, usually including personal development, cognitive interest, social contact and so on.

21. Without the pressure to learn and to succeed, participants who might have been averse to learning in the past enjoyed learning more and took more courses now. They saw education now as a voluntary activity.

B. Education as a Means to Prepare for Old Age

22. The role that education could play in participants' lives was not obvious to many of them. In fact, many did not think much about life several years after.

23. As a result, many did not have a plan, educational or otherwise, to address specific issues likely to arise in their old age.

C. Deciding What Courses to Take

24. The subject matter of a course might not be the overriding concern of many participants. What courses were readily available and accessible, as well as influences from friends, were also important factors.

25. Courses participants took might not necessarily reflect their interests. Some courses were seen as intermediate steps to courses that some participants were really interested in. For example, some took basic literacy courses in preparation for computer courses that they were interested in.

D. Deciding Where to Take Courses

26. Most limited their organized educational activities within their elderly centers. The elderly centers appealed to many of them because of convenient location and class time, low course fees, and familiar people and neighborhood.

E. How to Learn

27. Participants would like to learn at their own pace and without pressure.

28. They would prefer learning with people of similar age as it would facilitate communication among classmates and allow instructors to follow their progress and make adjustments more easily.

F. Worries About Taking Courses

29. Participants worried that their physical abilities and their financial status might present obstacles to learning.

30. Many participants claimed that they already experienced a decline in their memory. They were concerned about its adverse effects on their ability to take courses and learn effectively.

31. With limited income after retirement, participant found it difficult to finance all the courses that they were interested in taking. The cost of taking a course included tuition fees, transportation costs and other relevant miscellaneous costs.

G. Reasons for Not Taking Courses

32. While only a few participants of our focus groups were not interested in taking courses, the three non-learners each offered a different reason. One of them was still looking for a job and did not have for learning, unless such learning would help him find a job.

33. One said she was interested in a lot of things. She did not take courses because she just saw no urgent needs and hence no specific purposes for any taking courses.

34. The other one had just retired and would like to relax for some time before considering taking courses.

IV. Conclusions

35. The findings match our general impression and expectation in terms of learning needs, preferences and deterrents of the elderly population at large. Such generalization should however be exercised with caution. Owing to high non-response rate, respondents in our study were more likely to be active members of MEs and SEs, who may be quite different from less active members and elderly non-members in some essential ways. Still, what we have learned from this study could be of value not only to the study of elderly learning with respect to members, but also with respect to the whole elderly population. Conclusions that could be derived from the findings are presented in the following sections.

A. Learners

Increasing Gap Between Have and Have-Not

36. Non-learners are in general over-represented by male, older and uneducated members. The old-olds and the uneducated are usually considered to be less capable of meeting life challenges and enjoying a fuller life. Failing to encourage non-learners to participate – for example, by focusing only on serving learners – would therefore run the risk of widening even further the gap between the have and the have-not.

B. Learning Needs

Learners' Needs are Numerous and Diverse – Intellectual, Physical, Mental and Psychological Well-Being All Important

37. The large number of reasons cited by each learner / would-be learner indicates that the needs that members would like to satisfy through taking courses are numerous. The wide variety of reasons cited also reflects the diversity of their needs.

38. Coping needs are by no means the only needs that learners would like to satisfy through taking courses. The needs for health, social relationship, social welfare, personal development, escape or simulation and cognitive interest cannot be ignored. These needs reflect the importance learners place on their intellectual, physical, mental and psychological well-being.

39. Furthermore, the significant association of learners' demographic characteristics with some of the reasons for taking courses indicates that members of different gender, of different age and of different education place different importance on different needs.

Soon-to-be-olds Not Preparing for Life Transitions

40. The fact that even the soon-to-be-olds (people aged 55 to 60) might not think seriously about their life several years after is a real concern. It seems that they might not be aware of or feel the needs to have specific plan for this transitional period and beyond.

41. Without recognizing such needs, they are less likely to align their learning with their needs and are also less motivated to learn, especially taking courses that are considered to be 'heavy' in content.

C. *Deterrents to Learning*

Myths about Aging Popular Among Non-learners

42. Many old people themselves still think that ‘old people cannot learn’, despite scientific evidence showing otherwise. Many non-learners do not take courses because of their lack of confidence in their physical and mental abilities to learn. They think they are ‘too old to learn’, ‘not good at learning’, or their ‘health problems’ would prevent them from learning.

43. Another myth that ‘old people do not need to learn’ is also prevalent as reflected by the fact that many non-learners lack interest or urge in learning. This could be resulted from not being aware of their future needs, having low expectations of themselves, or not seeing relevance of education to their needs.

Institutional and Informational Barriers Seemingly Insignificant

44. Non-learners seem to perceive relatively few institutional and informational barriers to learning. A straight forward explanation is that these are indeed not serious barriers, as they are all members of elderly centers, which are after all one of the largest providers of education for the elderly.

45. An alternative explanation is that a member who does not take courses for some dispositional or situational reasons will naturally not perceive any institutional or informational constraints as barriers.

D. *Learning Preferences*

Elderly Centers a Popular Place for Learning

46. Many members consider elderly centers as their centers for activities. Institutional and informational barriers are therefore not likely to be serious enough to prevent many of them from taking part in organized educational activities offered by the centers. The proximity to home, the day-time classes, the low tuition fees, the familiar surrounding and people are all features of elderly centers that appeal to would-be learners.

47. In addition, at the centers, learning with other elderly people facilitates communication among classmates. Courses offered by the centers are usually carefully designed with the elderly in mind. With the knowledge that the centers have in dealing with the elderly, there is more likely to have sufficient support given to the learners to help them succeed in their learning.

Traditional Instruction Methods Still Preferred by Learners

48. Classroom lecturing is still seen by many learners / would-be learners as the preferred method of instruction, while independent study is still not popular. One reason may be that instructor’s instant feedback is considered by the elderly to be

essentially in making their learning experience a success. Also, independent study lacks the social contact and interaction that makes group learning attractive.

Vocational Training Courses and Formal Academic Courses Preferred by Few

49. Members are usually retired or are homemakers. Many are averse to learning under pressure and are more interested in leisure pursuit. So while it is always appealing to have some kind of employable skills or some academic qualifications, many members have neither the urgent need nor the determination to take vocational or intellectually rigorous courses.

V. Recommendations

Funding and Resource allocation be Comprehensive in Coverage

50. Funding should not be limited to providing services to eager learners. Resources should also be allocated to promote and facilitate current non-learners to take up learning.

51. How to motivate soon-to-be olds' learning in their latter life and to provide early intervention during this life transition period should also be seriously examined in future research.

Educators be More Knowledgeable About Educating the Elderly

52. Educating elderly people is not like educating school children or working adults. Expertise and specialized knowledge are required. Training in utilizing theories and practices related to education for the elderly should be readily provided to educators and program planners.

The Elderly be Helped to Understand own Learning Needs and Style

53. People who are not aware of their needs will be less motivated to learn. They should be helped to understand better their learning needs, as well as learning style, through a more systematic analysis of and planning for their personal needs. They should be exposed to more innovative possibilities in terms of course content, learning environments and instructional methods.

Periodic Needs Assessment and Program / Course Revision Required

54. The heterogeneity of the members requires a diverse content and a variety of learning environment and instructional methods. Program planners and developers should therefore be prepared to carry out periodic needs assessment and program / course revision to monitor and address the different needs of their clients.

Program / Course Development to Involve Clients

55. For program / course development, it is essential to get clients actively involved in the process. Such exercise serves to help developers better grasp the

needs and preferences of their clients, to review and remove likely institutional barriers their clients might encounter, and to help clients themselves better understand their needs and style so as to make them aware of the relevance of the program course.

56. An approach would be to engage clients as partners in the conduct of the program / course development, e.g. recruiting and training clients as market researchers. Not only would this be an education for the elderly participants, these elderly researchers could also serve as living and convincing examples of the fact that “the elders can learn too”. In the course of their interviews, they could establish rapport and share experiences with their subjects, especially the non-learners, thereby helping to break the myth about ageing among the doubters.

Elderly Center be Focal Point of Learning

57. Elderly centers should become the focal point of learning for the elderly. The centers are already one of the largest providers of education to the elderly. The lower institutional barriers usually associated with the centers, their expert knowledge in dealing with elderly people, the rapport they have built up with their members position them better than other educational institutions in promoting and facilitate learning among their members, as well as the rest of the elderly population.

58. The elderly centers should therefore utilize their advantages and form alliances with other educational institutions to provide more diverse programs and courses to their clients.