

# On 'learning for leisure' and the margins of mainstream education: A critical review of the University of the Third Age Movement in Malaysia

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**Abstract.** The University of the Third Age (U3A) has been promoted as an example of positive engagement in later life by many countries around the world. Nevertheless, the situation of lifelong learning is diverse and varies between countries, particularly in Malaysia. Using the case of two U3A associations in the Greater Klang Valley area, the authors study the institutionalisation of later-life learning in the local context. The review outlined the operational structure and practices of the two separate groups, noting the differences between U3As in Malaysia with that of other developed countries, as well as highlighting the issues and challenges faced by advocators of older adult learning in Malaysia. It is evident that lifelong learning for older persons lagged behind in multiple ways in terms of the vision and philosophy, operational framework and funding structure despite the imperatives of related national policy discourse. Learning as a leisure activity for older adults has remained outside the education system that focuses on human capital development and return of investment. An age-stratified education system, coupled with stereotypes of ageing, compressed the time and space for learning in later life, relegating it to the margins of social welfare. At the micro level, financial uncertainties and competition for limited government funding has detracted the U3A associations from collaborating with existing civil society groups. Concomitantly, the shortage of skilled and coordinating personnel, member attrition, and cultural ideas about later-life learning negate the expansion and replication of the U3A movement in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** lifelong learning, older adults, University for the Third Age (U3A), policy, Malaysia.

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## **Introduction**

The broad concept of lifelong learning is embodied in a utopian ideal of a learning society in which people of all ages should be encouraged, equipped, and incentivized to participate in learning across different environments on a continuing basis throughout life. The Delors report (1996) emphasised this concept of lifelong learning through the four pillars of education, namely, learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together. Lifelong learning for older adults tends to centre on self-care, self-improvement, and self-fulfilment. Older adults must be equipped with the knowledge of the consequences of ageing and encouraged to partake in such learning initiatives to acquire necessary skills to deal with life transitions. Lifelong learning as a conduit for social change is widespread (Steventon, Cureton, & Clouder, 2016) and becomes relevant in the context of knowledge economy and population ageing.

The knowledge economy capitalises on education and knowledge, generally known as human capital, to serve as a productive asset and to yield returns for the individual, the business and the economy. In this regard, lifelong learning in policy is primarily related to human capital to enable people to be productive and remain in the labour market longer, upgrade their skills or venture into a new career and become more adaptable to change and multiple transitions (Barnes, Brown, & Warhurst, 2016; Boström & Schmidt-Hertha, 2017). Lifelong learning goals include providing a 'second chance' at formal learning for adults who missed the opportunity due to socio-historical circumstances earlier in life (Orr & Hovdhaugen, 2014; Siivonen, 2016). Despite that, adult learning statistics generally exclude adults over the age of 65, assuming that they have already exited the workforce (Narushima, Liu, & Diestelkamp, 2016). In other words, investments in personal productivity beyond the mandatory or normal retirement age imply opportunity costs and marginal impact on human capital. On the other hand, economic analysis also demonstrates that delayed entry and earlier exits from the workforce due to educational opportunities and compulsory retirement age would reduce the time in employment at both ends (Baruch, Sayce, & Gregoriou, 2014). Thus, an age-stratified approach on human capital development may lead to a waste of productive capacity over the life course.

In the context of population ageing, a lifelong learning paradigm entails modern policy goals to deliver physical, psychological and even societal benefits including delayed cognitive decline (Simone & Scullin, 2006), Baumgart, Snyder, Carrillo, Fazio, Kim & Johns, 2015), increased physical activity (Ahn & Janke, 2011; Greaney, Lees, Blissmer, Riebe, & Clark, 2016), improvement in quality of life (Escuder-Mollon, Esteller-Curto, Ochoa, & Bardus, 2014), as well as enhanced positive social relationships and preservation of social capital (Merriam & Kee, 2014). Learning and active participation in later life are seen as the panacea to create a more positive experience of ageing (Manheimer, 2008; Lunenfeld & Stratton, 2013). Nonetheless, Slowey and Schuetze (2015) argue that some post-secondary institutions were slow to accommodate lifelong learners and the concept of lifelong learning remained underdeveloped. In the same vein, the adoption of World Health Organisation's active ageing framework in some countries has been too focused on physical activity, paid work and volunteerism, and less so on the lifelong aspects of learning (Narushima, Liu & Diestelkamp,

2016). This is due to the fact that the adoption of the active ageing framework by governments is linked to concerns of the presumed increasing burden of financing health care and social services (Narushima et al., 2016). Therefore, despite the mainstreaming of lifelong learning in national policies for education and active ageing, the challenges of developing a coordinated and cross-sectoral responses still persist.

The engagement in learning throughout the life course and an extension in working life augur well for active ageing to mitigate issues such as ill health and dependency in old age. Since the proliferation of learning opportunities for midlife and older adults in the early 1970s, the University for the Third Age (U3A) has become a vital institution of late-life learning through continued educational experience derived from academic and non-academic courses, excursions, community services, and volunteerism (Manheimer, 2008; Formosa, 2014). Later-life learning establishments, such as the U3A have become the mainstream in many ageing societies globally and part of the societal goal of social inclusion of older adults. The change in the focus of lifelong learning on social capital and social cohesion in the new millennium have shifted the discourse largely from economic concerns to prioritising social relationships (Boström & Schmidt-Hertha, 2017). In line with the policy approach, lifelong learning policies and programmes underpin the approaches of managing the risks of an ageing population via a more inclusive educational system and socially vibrant lifestyle in later life.

Based on the case of two registered U3A associations in Malaysia, this paper reviews the institutionalisation of later-life learning in the local setting. The review delineates the operational structure and practices of the two U3A groups, highlights the differences between U3As in Malaysia with that of other developed countries, as well as discussing the issues and challenges faced by the U3A movement in Malaysia.

### **U3A models in selected developed countries**

Different regions and countries offer different lifelong learning systems and perspectives. Lifelong learning systems in most developed countries can be categorized based on the institutional structures, welfare and governance, dominant pedagogies as well as knowledge/programmes and traditions (Green, 2006). It is clear that different nations have their own interpretation and implementation of lifelong learning. Developed countries invest, regulate, create and apply different types of lifelong programmes for their citizens. In developing countries, whilst the responsibility of developing and implementing lifelong learning programmes for older adults becomes the concern of the community and voluntary sectors, the role of the government is more prominent in organising and offering lifelong learning for older adults such as in the case of China's Universities for the Aged. Lifelong learning for older persons in other developing countries such as Thailand and Vietnam focuses more on adult literacy and decent work initiatives through Community Learning Centres (CLCs) (Singh, 2002; UNESCO, 2008; Dhirathiti, 2014).

### *France*

France and some Mediterranean countries, have established the most centralised lifelong learning system in which the government or educational institutions provide the education and training for adults. The main objectives of developing the U3A in France are to improve the quality of older adults' life, to develop a similar educational system or programmes of younger learners for older adults, conducting research projects, and to develop programmes in gerontology. The approach to the U3A in France was initially an academic-based programme and a top-bottom approach, with the first U3A established in Toulouse in 1973. By 1978, there were already more than a 100 U3As but the movement opened up to a wider group beyond older persons in the 1990s. Many U3As in France evolved and were rebranded into Universities of All Ages (*Universite Tous Ages*) or Universities of Leisure or Free Time (*Universite du Temps Libre*) to broaden their appeal to local communities with a renewed emphasis on retraining and employment (Chamahian, 2010). The funding for these programmes are often supported by private or non-profit organisations (Kern, 2016). The national coordinating body, UFUTA (*Union Francaise des Universites de Tous Ages*), reported that there are more than 70,000 students in 45 establishments and 250 branches throughout France in 2013.

### *Germany*

Germany and some German speaking countries, control and regulate the learning programmes at regional level as the central government does not have a major role in the educational system. Most of these countries which include Austria, Germany, German-speaking Switzerland, and the Netherlands have strong training structure which develops a clear pathway from school to work. These countries have a structured learning system with a mixture of statutory and sectoral agreements on licensing to practice. Initially, older adults were not a target group for adult education because the main interest of the educational system was to prepare citizens for jobs. In the 1970s, some educational institutes began to offer courses for older adults, concentrating on preparations for retirement and leisure activities. Later in the 1980s, the first course to educate older adults on their life situation was designed; as the number of older adults who were in the education system emerged and intergenerational learning became more popular. Concurrently, self-help groups of older adults have become more active and these groups offered learning courses in more informal manner. Informal learning is accepted to be a significant part of older adults' lives which the learners take responsibility of their own learning process. Nowadays, the federal government addresses research and educational programmes for older adults specifically for labour force development. Although there are federal-funded vocational training programmes for older workers, there are no state-funded learning activities available for retired citizens on the assumption that the population is generally sufficiently affluent to spend on their own education. In addition, there are several initiatives and programmes in later life which are held by local and regional organizations. Most of the programmes and lifelong learning initiatives are developed by the community and not by federal public institutions or agencies (Schmidt-Hertha, 2016).

### *Nordic countries*

The Nordic countries have established rules and regulations for education at local levels in all states, yet within a robust central government framework that operates according to a steering by goals policy. Post-compulsory education and training includes high levels of public funding but also solid social partnership traditions with regards to work-based learning. The Nordic model of lifelong learning mainly focuses on creating equal opportunities for all ages to participate and gain from the educational system. There are three main goals for adult education in this model: (a) partaking in a wider society associated with the concepts of democracy, civil society and citizenship; (b) developing and maintaining the equal match between educational qualifications and skills as well as increasing key skills and performance in the labour market and (c) creating an inclusive learning system which can include all ages (Tuijnman, 2003). The main characteristics of lifelong learning according to a Nordic model are summarized as being flexible, inclusive, needs-adjusted and available for all. One of the most important success factors of the Nordic model is the collaboration that exists among not just different states but all countries and all stakeholders, even though there are different cross-national perspectives toward lifelong learning (Tikkanen, 2011). In his paper, Yenerall (2003) noted that the Finnish U3As are a “cultural hybrid” of the French and British models where a “U3A institution would be affiliated with a university programme, would use university resources, but would rely heavily on ‘local learning groups’ of older Finnish students to define the curricula to be implemented on a semester by semester basis”, with nine U3As and 24 satellite centres serving well over 4,500 older persons in 1999. The first Swedish U3A was founded in 1979 at Uppsala and a conference report in 2013 reported that there are 29 U3As in Sweden that are formally linked to the Folkuniversitetet, an adult educational association that is supported by the Government (Aldskogius, 2013). U3A did not gain a strong foothold or presence in Denmark but flourished in Norway. The web portal [www.u3a.no](http://www.u3a.no) listed over 70 links to U3A organizations in Norway. According to Tosse (2013), about half of the Norwegian U3As are extensions or associated with the Folkuniversitetet (the Folk University system) that received State subsidies and only a few have links to universities or colleges.

### *The United Kingdom*

The United Kingdom, and the English-speaking countries, have a highly-decentralized education system. Adult education and training is rather widespread yet highly uneven, which has factually stimulated high levels of specialization and individualization in learning (Green, 2006). The uneven approach to lifelong learning for older adults is manifested throughout the United Kingdom and the concept of lifelong learning has undergone transformation due to the development at regional, national and international levels. Although the importance of education has been putative within the country’s community and the concept of lifelong learning for older adults has been well established, the responsibility of creating and delivering lifelong learning programmes for older persons falls mainly to the voluntary sector. Hence, the funding and the quality of such programmes are variable (Withnall, 2016). The Third Age Trust, the national representative body for U3As in the UK

for example, is both a limited company and a registered charity, but local U3As operate independently of each other. With a typical size of about 250 members, there are almost 900 registered U3As at the end of 2013 (Beckett, 2014).

### *China*

China, though still a developing country, saw its first U3A set up in Shandong in 1983 (Chiu, 2012). The U3As then grew rapidly in the cities and the China Association of Universities for the Aged (CAUA) was formed in 1988. Its growth has been staggering and it was estimated that today there are more than 60,000 UTAs in China with 7.6 million participants (Yang, 2016). These Universities of the Aged rely heavily on government support and funding but are immensely popular, with some setting up distance learning offices to reach out to underserved communities. The government of China actively supports the development of such institutions and targets to have at least one university for older persons in each city by 2020 (see 13th Five Year Plan for Elderly Care by the State Council of People's Republic of China, 2017). Different countries and regions have used global definitions of lifelong learning and created tailored approaches to meet the needs of their older adults. The way lifelong learning for older adults is interpreted and implemented in different local communities, regions and nations around the globe depends on several factors such as economic development, educational systems, culture, and the needs of society.

### **Case presentation**

Learning in later life in Malaysia can be formal, non-formal and informal. Formal education is usually part of human capital development and takes place in formal learning institutions with a clear structure and specific learning outcomes. Non-formal learning in the context of a knowledge economy in Malaysia takes form in the workplace and on-the-job training programmes to sustain or improve individual productivity with expectations of return on investment. There is a dearth of information on later-life learning in this country and such programmes have been limited in reach and scope. For the older Malaysians, senior citizen clubs are more common in urban towns and cities, while traditional Quranic learning have always been a mainstay of Islamic communities (Muhamad & Merriam, 2000). Against this backdrop, the U3A associations are not sufficiently visible as non-formal education avenues for older adults and are commonly perceived as foreign to people who are more used to less formal educational activities in later life. For this paper, key individuals from U3A Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, U3A Bandar Utama and the Malaysian Research Institute on Ageing (MyAgeing), were interviewed separately.

### *From U3A Malaysia to U3A Kuala Lumpur and Selangor*

In 2007, the Institute of Gerontology, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), introduced a Lifelong Learning Initiative for the Elderly (LLIFE) programme and it became a precursor to the development of the first University of the Third Age in the country a year later. Initial funding was provided through a project jointly funded by the Malaysian government and the United

Nations Population Fund to promote lifelong learning among older persons. A hybrid of the British and the French U3A models, the fee-based programme was initially planned and managed by the Institute staff with full support from the public university - sharing office space, manpower and campus facilities. Right from the onset, it was envisioned that the lifelong learning programme would eventually be operated and managed by senior citizens themselves to be truly sustainable and independent. A pro-tem committee consisting of older participants was appointed in 2009 and the Association of Lifelong Learning for Older Persons (U3A) Kuala Lumpur and Selangor (No. 2522-10-SEL) was successfully registered in 2010. A gradual handover process began and since 2012, the elected committee members of the U3A Kuala Lumpur and Selangor have managed all aspects of the lifelong learning programme with the continued support of various government agencies and private companies. Its President is limited to a maximum of two consecutive terms and in 2017 a new and the third President was elected.

The lifelong learning programme based primarily in UPM Serdang campus retains its original aims to: (a) utilize lifelong learning to optimize the potential and ability of older adults, (b) develop an active ageing model by empowering older adults' social, cultural, and economic participation, and (c) increase Malaysian senior citizens' opportunity to contribute to national development. In the beginning, the U3A Malaysia programme, as it was known then, experimented with different modalities and fee structures. Today, members pay a fixed rate about RM30 per course, to attend weekly courses offered in a two-semester system. Instructors were engaged from within and outside the public university. Some courses, each lasting about four to six weeks, are held outside the UPM campus and members are free to suggest and propose new subjects to be included in future semester schedules. An orientation event is organized before the commencement of semester to publicize the courses and a certificate presentation ceremony is held at the end of the calendar year. From an initial 84 participating senior citizens in 2008, the programme has grown to serve well over 250 members a year on average, offering over 50 courses that has benefitted more than 800 different individuals since its inception. A majority of the members are women, Malays and almost all of them have at least a secondary level education. Most of the members are from Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and a small number from Putrajaya and other nearby states. Nonetheless, the current membership size has plateaued and the membership base presently comprises approximately 60 per cent of the Chinese ethnic group. Although there are no prerequisites for participation, a majority of the members are English-speaking and it is the working language of the Executive Committee.

The U3A programme has expanded the borders of knowledge, skills and experience among its members, and has encouraged them to be active participants in their own learning process. The members regularly provide input, feedback and evaluation regarding their courses and some of them became course instructors themselves. Members also actively participate in the running of the organization, including grant applications and other fundraising activities, maintaining their own Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/U3AMalaysia](http://www.facebook.com/U3AMalaysia)) and setting up a Gamelan musical troupe. Today, the lifelong learning activities under U3A Kuala Lumpur and Selangor are partially funded by the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia, and members manage their own activities with the support provided from the Malaysian Research Institute of Ageing, University

Putra Malaysia. It is highly dependent on funding support from the Government to make up shortfalls from the collection of course fees and operates from a shared office space at the Institute. In 2015, the 11th Malaysia Plan singled out the University of the Third Age programme for replication at the national level with other Senior Citizen Activity Centres, NGOs and community colleges (Economic Planning Unit, 2015). Unfortunately, the up-scaling of the programme is still largely in its planning and development stages as earlier attempts for replication in Shah Alam and Kota Bharu have yet to materialize. Thus far, the U3A programme in Serdang has led to many new ideas and outreach activities such as a pilot lifelong learning programme for the institutionalised older persons at a federal-funded old folks' home 'Rumah Seri Kenangan Cheras', the e-MAS computing knowledge transfer programme in collaboration with the National Council of Senior Citizens Organization Malaysia (NACSCOM), an intergenerational learning programme at a secondary school in Kajang funded by UNESCO, and a financial education programme for mature women funded by Citi Foundation through United Way World. In all these programmes and projects by the Malaysian Research Institute of Ageing (MyAgeing), participating U3A members have played key roles as instructors, mentors, trainers, coordinators and facilitators. This does not include the numerous occasions where U3A members were included in research surveys, focus group discussions, laboratory studies as well as other community outreach activities by MyAgeing, UPM and collaborations with other institutions of higher education. All in all, the U3A programme is more than just a lifelong learning initiative to gain knowledge and leisure, it is a platform to mobilize and empower older adults (Ibrahim & Hamid, 2012).

#### *A new model in U3A Bandar Utama*

In line with the need for expansion and replication of the U3A programme in Malaysia, efforts began as early as mid-2015 where a new branch was proposed for Bandar Utama, a highly urbanized and affluent township in Selangor. Efforts to establish the Bandar Utama branch was spearheaded by several members of the U3A Kuala Lumpur (KL) and Selangor in Serdang. Defying all expectations, a soft launch of the U3A branch in Bandar Utama was quickly publicized in October 2015 and a pro-term committee was formed.

The Malaysian Research Institute on Ageing (MyAgeing), U3A Kuala Lumpur and Selangor and U3A Bandar Utama have attempted to chart a path that could be replicated at the national and state levels. In the 2016, during the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of U3A Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, attending members approved key amendments to the Association's original charter in order to accommodate a branch structure at the district or sub-district levels. However, the proposed amendments were never submitted to the Registrar of Societies (ROS) as the inaugural AGM of U3A Bandar Utama held shortly later expressed a strong desire to be an autonomous entity. U3A Bandar Utama submitted its own independent charter and was successfully registered by mid-2016 (PPM-025-10-14042016). The new group maintains its own social media platform at [www.facebook.com/u3abu/](http://www.facebook.com/u3abu/).

The rapid establishment of U3A Bandar Utama was leveraged by its strong community linkages and leadership of an appointed councillor in the Petaling Jaya City Council (MBPJ).

Links to the State government political party machinery have helped in the initial setup and securing of resources, in particularly the use of a community centre as its base of operations. Without other sources of funding, U3A Bandar Utama relies fully on membership fees and income from courses to sustain its activities. This has necessitated significant changes in the programme structure and management as fixed rate fees could not be adopted. U3A Bandar Utama is hence a perfect study of the British U3A self-help model in Malaysia. The challenges faced by the new U3A are numerous and significant, and its association to personalities with strong political affiliations can be a double-edged sword. As a case in point, long-term stability of the Association is affected by short-term changes in personal political fortunes, but the U3A Bandar Utama experience have opened up new, possible avenues for replication.

### **Emergent issues**

Lifelong learning for older adults has lagged behind in the philosophy, framework and funding structure despite the imperatives of lifelong learning in national policy discourse. The education system is centred toward human capital development focusing on the younger generation in line with the focus on nation-building and wealth creation toward becoming a high-income nation (Economic Planning Unit, 2015; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015; UNESCO, 2015). Neoliberalist ideologies of cost-efficiency, privatisation and productivity intermingle with an interventionist approach in the country's deeply regulated higher education system, resulting in major reduction in university funding and a drastic loss of institutional autonomy (Lee, 2004). In this context, lifelong learning is no longer regarded as a public good but as a commodity and henceforth, the education system goals are directed at fulfilling market objectives, including graduate employability, global competitiveness and productivity. As such, when these graduates enter the workforce, they are expected by their employers to perform to achieve productivity goals. Although the employers provide skill development programmes, these trainings are tied to productivity enhancement and promotions, rather than as purposeful learning.

#### *Policy orientation and implementation*

The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MoHE) (2011) recognises lifelong learning as the third pillar in human capital development, which is built upon a continuous process to enable individuals to acquire and update their interests, knowledge, qualifications and skills at all levels of education and work environment, as well as in post-retirement. Despite the promulgation of lifelong learning in the national development plan and the higher education blueprint (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007, 2011; Economic Planning Unit, 2015), these documents remained silent on the policy framework and funding structure for lifelong learning in old age did not materialise.

With a higher education system underpinned by employability and productivity, later-life learning in the non-formal and informal domains remains invisible. Even as these policies adopt the ethos of lifelong learning as learning over the life course, there is a need to slot in

the learning pursuits within a specific time frame within the formal education system. For instance, the age limit for doctoral applicants under the MoHE's MyBrain15 programme is recently revised, with the limit now set at 45 years old. It is evident that the scholarships are not attainable after a certain age probably because older adults' population is no longer considered relevant as an asset or as a valuable investment to the nation. Since older adults are not considered as a major population served by the education system, the system does not have specific allocations for learning programmes in later life; the exception is for those who attached to formal education and research. As lifelong learning is not fully integrated with the other two pillars of education, namely the school and higher education systems, the system does not recognise the contribution of other types of learning towards qualifications framework. The lack of recognition for non-formal education and informal learning in the qualifications framework was previously reported (UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning, undated). The two groups that are marginalised by the lifelong learning strategy, comprising those who were excluded across various range of basic and post-basic education and those with some post-basic education but are not capable of dealing with the increasingly technological environment (Gobaloo & Mohd. Fahmi, 2013), represent the majority of later-life learners.

In most developed countries, there are many educational opportunities for older adults. However, these opportunities are not mentioned as learning initiatives but as leisure activity. In tandem with the stereotypes of ageing, older adults' opportunity to pursue learning as a leisure activity has remained at the margins of the national education system. The stereotypical view of ageing is inextricably linked to the 4Ds of death, disease, disability and decline which has deterred older adults from purposeful learning. The higher education policies have not fully transformed the understanding of knowledge and learning, missions, structures and practices in line with the idea of lifelong learning; to envision a learning society that is open, flexible, and egalitarian (Slowey & Schuetze, 2015). Hence, the education system has not embraced the culture of learning, which purports to uphold social justice with emphasis on creating educational opportunity for all, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or class. There are some emerging issues to be addressed by the different sectors involved in lifelong learning for older adults, which include the education and training sectors forming a single comprehensive qualifications framework, leisure activities for retirees, training of volunteers, health education as well as self-care (Kern, 2016).

For many years, occupational training has been championed by young employees rather than older ones. To include older employees, knowledge must be developed based on the employees' cognitive capabilities, experience and motivation. Also, the diversity of needs must be addressed appropriately to meet the needs of the employees as well as the employers. Moreover, there are some older adults who already are voluntarily engaged in society, public or private sectors. The main challenge is gauge their competency and offer them the right training for acquisition of "right" skills and to meet the necessities of their jobs ((*ibid.*)). Ideally, the spaces for learning transcends formal educational institutions, as they also encompass non-formal education in the workplace or in the community, and through self-directed learning (Slowey & Schuetze, 2015). Therefore, an age-stratified education system, coupled

with stereotypes of ageing, have compressed the time and space for learning in later life relegating it to the margins as part of social welfare.

An example of programme implemented at secondary and tertiary level educational institutions under the National Policy for Older Persons 2011, spearheaded by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MoWFCD), is the propagation of the policy and programmes for students to interact with older adults. The MoWFCD also allocates funding for U3A associations and other community organisations through the Department of Social Welfare. Being consigned under the Association Grants' Scheme, the registered U3A associations have to compete with one another as well as with the other, more established non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in support of the three main areas under the purview of the Ministry, namely women's development, family development and community development. The U3A associations are eligible to apply for a grant under the rubric of community development focusing on elder rehabilitation and wellbeing or on retirement planning. Against all these different societal causes, the chances of securing government funding are low. The awarding of grants can sometimes be subjected to the Ministry's key performance indicators and political headwinds or connections. It is evident that a coordinating body is needed to bridge the different roles of the MoWFCD and lifelong learning proponents by the Department of Community Colleges under the Ministry of Higher Education, thus justifying the repeated calls for a National Third Age Learning Directorate (N3ALD) by MyAgeing, UPM.

#### *Unsustainable practices*

The implementation of lifelong learning policies for older adults requires sector-wide approaches, which rely on a more structured funding to support inter-ministerial or inter-agency programmes impacting at the micro level. Instead, narrow sectoral arrangements which are perceived not as a multi-stakeholder process but as a specific government programme championed by a single ministry, have led to challenges at the micro level. One of the major challenges is financial unsustainability and competition for limited government funding. Community-based associations run the risk of becoming financially unsustainable due to inadequacies in organisational capacity, including general administration (procedures, roles, and functions); financial management (fund raising and applying for grants); and accountability (complying to funding requirements and to performing financial audits). As a case in point, key informants from both the U3A associations reported that they are struggling to stay afloat. Without public funding and support from both government agencies and private corporations, the U3A programmes can no longer be viable. As a consequence, the relationship between the U3A associations and other existing community groups or associations has less to do with collaboration and more about competition due to limited funding resources. The challenges in developing a mechanism to expand the U3A in Malaysia is in developing new thinking and finding a common working platform. In this manner, it would be better to assist new U3As and socialise them to wean and to run their own programmes after becoming independent, by broadening their horizon as social enterprises and soliciting support from related private institutions, businesses and industries.

The culture of dependency on the government for support will take time to resolve as the mentality is culturally enshrined and perpetuated. Affirmative action programmes and interventionist measures have been part of the country's development and welfare policy approaches, promoting dependency on government handouts (Menon, 2009; Azman, Sulaiman, Mohamad, Jamir Singh, Yahaya & Drani, 2014). At the institutional level, the idea of giving free handouts is short-lived as it depended on whether the patron remains in power or on the current priorities of a political figure or party. The process can also develop a sense of mistrust, conflict in terms of legitimacy and a quiet rivalry between the existing and the new non-governmental organisations. When politics have a hand in an organisation's dealings, questions of transparency will invariably arise. There are lessons to be learnt from past and current lifelong learning programmes in Malaysia as there are many pathways that are available (Ibrahim & Hamid, 2012). The third age learning movement must be willing to explore new modalities across the digital-traditional divide and establish more sustainable inter-sectoral partnerships.

#### *Shortages in human resource*

Both U3A associations lack the resources to hire skilled personnel to administer the programme. Not many U3A members are computer-savvy and able (or willing) to do clerical tasks using computer applications such as issuing regular letters or memos and to undertake data entry. Member mobilization is a common issue. Besides that, those who are currently doing administrative duties are already very old or are no longer interested to serve longer as a committee member. Hence, while the approach of 'learning for leisure' in U3A associations in Malaysia has attracted participation among older adults, it also demotivated them from taking responsibility in the coordination or daily operations of the courses as organizers. Many U3A members are content to be consumers of the services offered, but are generally more reluctant in getting involved as coordinators or managers.

Like many NGOs in Malaysia, the level of organisation and management of the association is still in its infancy. As a consequence, these associations are not managed professionally as an organisation. Furthermore, as a learning organisation the members should understand the expectations of the association, monitor the attainment of learning goals, evaluate the effectiveness of the learning programmes and rectify the issues that arise. As for current practices, it appears that current committee members rely upon their previous work experience and also the spirit of volunteerism to run the associations. It is the sheer dedication and hard work of the past and current executive committee members that have kept the U3A associations going and this is often undervalued or appreciated. Therefore, it will take some time for the U3As to become fully self-sustainable and functioning as the driving force for a non-formal adult learning organisation in Malaysia. In many ways, the difficulties faced by the U3A movement is closely linked to the broader problems of civil society groups in Malaysia.

### *Member attrition and mobilization*

In U3A associations, member retention ensures long-term stability and efforts are continuously made to minimize and overcome the disruptive effects of attrition. Membership drives have been commonly undertaken to boost membership numbers but sometimes there is an underlying cause that needs to be understood. Among the Malays, there is a significant drop in active participation, with only seven per cent who are presently enrolled in courses, even though there is a slight increase in new memberships. From the key informant interviews, it was revealed that the attrition among Malay members was attributed to a lack of interest in courses offered and that many of them were involved with grandparenting duties. A resounding theme of attrition due to the lack of options to progress in a particular course was also reported during the focus group discussions at the end of a learning period by the U3A Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. The need to have economy of scale to make the class viable has also led to some courses being offered but not sufficiently taking into consideration the pool of learners' prior knowledge and experiences. The minimum number of students is set at 15 to ensure cost-effectiveness, factoring in the cost of an instructor. Even though the U3A courses are not designed to provide certification, some members have felt stuck at the introductory or beginner stages and not able to progress to intermediate or advanced levels. This is related to the fact that the different batches of students who enrolled to meet the minimum student intake for a class, may also have taken the subject earlier on and expect new content/materials to be introduced. On the other hand, the U3A Bandar Utama faced a different issue related to attrition. The fact that the courses are run as short learning stints posed a problem when some courses are cancelled or postponed at the last minute. Members who have already paid for the course voiced their frustrations and felt less keen to join upcoming activities. This is essentially about balancing member expectations and the capacity of the organizers to deliver the programme activities.

### *Cultural ideas about later-life learning*

Based on the experience of U3A Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Malay members are more religious-centric and prefer courses such as Quranic recitation, Islamic revealed knowledge, and Arabic language. When these courses are offered in a semester, enrolment tends to increase for the older Malays. It has been argued that Malays tend to view late-life learning as an avenue to prepare for life after death and less appreciative towards more modern leisure pursuit that are centred around fun and amusement. Besides, it is also found that religious activities the most common activity for leisure among older Malays in Malaysia, especially among older females (Minhat, 2014). Malays in Singapore were also found to accept religious activities as part of the cultural script of growing old (Mehta, 2014). Therefore, courses such as musical instruments, dancing, choir and theatre were less popular within this demographic group. The second observation about course participation is that many members have a more pragmatic view about learning and lean towards practical and income-generating courses. The spirit of learning for knowledge's sake is not present, particularly in a non-formal setting. To illustrate this point, it was reported that many new members at U3A Bandar Utama did not truly understand what lifelong learning entails, as they imagined it to be an extension of

their usual senior citizen club activities such as hobby-based pursuits and socialising at the designated U3A centre. The notions of learning to empower behind the U3A programmes were not fully actualized. Whether in U3A Kuala Lumpur and Selangor or U3A Bandar Utama, traditional academic fare such as courses on philosophy, history, literature and current affairs have yet to make a significant presence in their line-up of subjects. At the heart of the issue is the matter of branding distinction – what sets U3A apart from other senior citizen groups and activity centres? As long as this is not satisfactorily resolved, the identity of U3As in Malaysia will remain ambiguous and indefinite.

It is clear that both the U3As in Malaysia have a lot of work cut out for them. Although U3A Kuala Lumpur and Selangor has been in operation longer, the executive committee and members have expressed little interest in further replication and up-scaling, needing to focus on the everyday running of their programmes and activities. It has achieved some funding continuity, but the annual community grant is unreliable and a strong, sustainable financial foundation has to be established if the group covets a broader, state-wide role. On the other hand, U3A Bandar Utama is trying to hit the ground running with limited resources under a short span of time. The groups will find some equilibrium and stability as time progresses, but this is contingent upon a committed effort to good management and transparent practices. The Malaysian Research Institute on Ageing has to rethink its bottom-up approaches and develop new modalities to get key stakeholders to work with each other. Justifying investments in lifelong learning for older persons is as important as the work to educate older persons to help themselves. At present, there is an urgent need for a national framework to link current and future U3As together to consolidate the cooperation with public, private and civil society partners - promoting a shared vision for third age learning for all older persons. Proponents of the U3A movement in Malaysia must adhere to several key principles for sustainability, emphasizing cooperation, efficiency and outcome-based approaches. The concept of U3A offers many promises and potentials for the empowerment, mobilization and mainstreaming of older persons. For Malaysia, at least, the U3A movement have just started to gain public attention. The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step and the few tentative steps have clearly illustrated the need for greater collaboration, coordination and pooling of resources. Where the journey will lead us will depend largely on the decisions and choices of key actors.

## **Conclusion**

Lifelong learning is a foundation of knowledge and considered as an epitome of an inclusive society. It deals with creating an environment to help all individuals gain knowledge, experience and develop skills. To ensure lifelong learning becomes a reality, it requires a comprehensive framework, collaborative alliances as well as recognition and support for learning in various spaces over the life course. In meeting the goals of lifelong learning, it takes all parties' responsibility which include governments, institutions and organisations. Resilience, resourcefulness and adaptability of older adults in every aspect of learning are required as lifelong learning faces several challenges both at the macro and micro levels. At the macro level, challenges persist such as societal transformation and cultural lag; awareness

and participation of stakeholders; incorporation the changes and transformation within the formal education system; policy integration for lifelong learning into the wider education system; an institutional framework for improved access, coordination and monitoring; as well as adequate tangible and intangible incentives. These challenges are amplified by the stereotypes of ageing which hinder later-life learning. As people get older, lifelong learning is relegated to the margins of workforce education and training systems due to the diminishing returns of human capital development on productivity beyond retirement age. Hence, we ought to be mindful of the macro context in evaluating institutional capacities such as the U3A associations in improving the quality of older adults' learning. At the micro level, the U3A associations are now part of a structured, non-formal education in later life, alongside informal learning that is customary in the community. Both of these types of learning are not recognised in the formal education system and are relegated to be part of social welfare. As a contender of funding for various social causes under the welfare department, these U3A associations have to compete for limited financial support, operate within insufficient capacity, and resort to unsustainable practices. These micro challenges have negated the expansion and replication of U3A associations in Malaysia in the absence of a strong, national coordinating body.

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