

Learning While Ageing

Current Status and Challenges of Senior Education in China¹

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For older adults, participating in education can positively impact cognition and psychological well-being while helping to prevent social isolation.² Education for retired individuals does not intend to enhance their career prospects; their motivation is purely personal. They often express a desire to learn, to explore subjects they are curious about, gain knowledge about contemporary society and its history, understand modern developments, avoid social exclusion, and stay active and creative, among others.³

China has a unique type of university, namely, Senior Citizens' University, where the average student is over age 60. These universities provide a broad and accessible curriculum designed to enrich their lives and foster lifelong learning. A wide range of subjects are offered, including foreign languages, computer skills, music, dance, photography, painting, various crafts, sports, and

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

² Ackermann, T. P., & Seifert, A. (2021). Older adults' engagement in senior university lectures and the effect of individual motivations. *Frontiers*

in Education, 6.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.59148>

³ Lubkina, V., Usca, S., & Kaupuzs, A. (2013).

Education and quality of life in senior citizens.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279951273_Education_and_quality_of_life_in_senior_citizens

cooking. Students benefit from a relaxed, pressure-free environment, focusing on enjoyment and personal growth. This setting allows senior citizens to pursue their interests, stay engaged, and maintain an active and fulfilling lifestyle. As of 2019, there are 76,296 public senior universities in China (which is 22.7% more than that in 2017.) More developed cities and provinces, especially cities along the east coastline of China, including Beijing and Shanghai, have more than 9000 senior universities each. The enrolment number has increased to 10.88 million in 2019.⁴

Statistics indicate that approximately 267 million people in China, or 18.9% of the population, are aged 60 and above.⁵ This figure is projected to reach 28% by 2040.⁶ As the ageing population grows, senior citizens are increasingly eager to continue learning. The senior citizens' universities in China help to cope with the ageing society and build a lifelong learning society.

Physical infrastructure

Senior citizens' universities have evolved from when they first operated out of rented spaces in 1980s to now featuring spacious, well-lit, and fully equipped modern campuses. As the value of lifelong learning for older adults became more recognised, significant investments were

made to improve the infrastructure of these universities. The courses can be conducted in a dedicated campus, a community centre, or a learning centre near senior citizens' home locations.

In 2010, the central government announced a strategy to boost senior education in a 10-year plan. In 2020, the government set strategies including expanding physical and human resource supply and encouraging public-private collaboration to support the development of senior citizen universities. In 2021, senior education was included in the life-long learning system in China. Latest in 2023, the first National University for Seniors was established, offering both physical and online courses. The aim is to develop nation-wide public service systems for senior education and to build a teaching resources database.

Today, the physical classrooms of these institutions provide various facilities that allow the students to do guided hands-on learning activities (Box 1). In addition to acquiring new knowledge and remaining physically active, senior citizens' universities also provide older adults with time and space for socialising with friends. This helps the older population to improve their mental wellbeing and avoid social isolation.

⁴ 中国老龄科学研究中心 - 中国老年大学协会发布
《中国老年教育发展报告(2019-2020)》(n.d.).

<http://www.crca.cn/index.php/13-agednews/468->

⁵ Global Times. (2022). China sets up national university for aged, to "build lifelong learning society."

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202211/1279845>.

[shtml#:~:text=On%20the%20basis%20of%20the,an d%20dance%20to%20photography%2C%20painti ng%2C](#)

⁶ World Health Organization (n.d.). Ageing and health - China. <https://www.who.int/china/health-topics/ageing>

Box 1: Examples of types of courses offered



Figure 1. Students at senior citizens' university doing painting and performing on campus.

Source: Global Times (2022).

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202211/1279845.shtml#:~:text=On%20the%20basis%20of%20the,and%20dance%20to%20photography%2C%20painting%2C>

- Art: music, dancing, modelling, calligraphy, painting, singing.
- Music instruments: Guzheng, electronic keyboard, erhu, violin.
- Health: health preservation, mental health counselling, nutrition.
- Sports: Tai Chi, chess.
- Lifestyle: Food and cooking, handcrafting.
- Language: English.
- Finance: insurance and financial management.
- Trending: photography, short videos, digital graphic design.

Source: Sohu (2021).

https://www.sohu.com/a/453300772_120993101

As most senior citizens' universities are sponsored by local government, the tuition fee is affordable, an average of 200 to 500 Chinese Yuan for one course. A key challenge facing physical learning at the institutions is the limited number of students admitted to each course as space and teaching resources are very limited. Due to the rapidly increasing ageing

population, the demand outweighs the supply of senior education in China. Especially in the North-East and West provinces where the ageing population is the largest, there are less than 1000 public senior universities in each province. Sometimes, applicants have to draw lots to get admission into popular courses. At the same time, the financial support for senior education from the central government is still very limited.

Online learning

Due to the proliferation of live streaming applications and e-learning platforms, older adults are enabled to acquire new knowledge anytime and anywhere. Online education also alleviates the challenge faced by physical senior universities with limited enrolment. Recently in 2024, the government has started to enhance enrolment in culture-related courses through the introduction of online learning.

The online courses are often more affordable and accessible as compared to physical learning. For example, the National University for Seniors provides regular streaming classes on its official website (Box 2).

Box 2: Live streaming courses offered by the National University for Seniors

直播日期	直播名称	主讲教师
6月3日 (09:30)	认识全球变暖	胡立峰
6月4日 (9:30)	王维何以为诗佛	冀朝阳
6月5日 (9:30)	百闻不如一试:生成式人工智能:(AIGC)的典型应用	郭欣悦
6月6日 (9:30)	室内设计中情绪空间的营造	张曼莹
6月7日 (9:30)	解锁孩子放学后的时间:小学课后服务的创新探索	陈凤英

Figure 2. Weekly online class schedule on the website of the National University for Seniors

The online classes are open to all and do not require any enrolment or payment. People who are interested can subscribe to the official account of the National University for Seniors and watch the live streaming public lectures when they are on air.

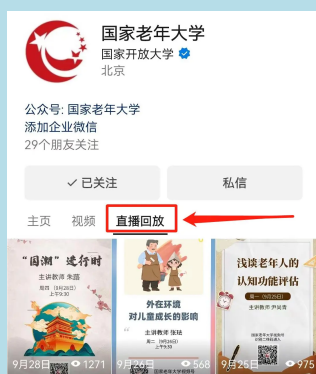


Figure 3. Recordings of lectures

Subscribers are able to watch the public lecture recordings if they miss any sessions. This is also free and open to the public.

Source: National University for Seniors (2024). https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/x46rRzLEOEtQ_Pu6LFtnzA

The National University for Seniors provides a combination of physical and

online education, where students can visit their physical campuses for certain complimentary courses that are not available online. However, the physical campuses have fewer branches than the population needs, reinforcing the insufficiency and unequal distribution of senior education resources. This has strengthened the role of online learning in senior education, and the number of online senior education institutions has increased to 6345, and online enrolment increased to 3.9 million in 2019, a 68.9% increase. The ratio of physical and online enrolment numbers is about 7 to 4. Online courses are much different from those in physical classrooms—physical classes are more physically and socially engaging. Hence, there is a need to further develop online senior education.

Challenges

As mentioned above, one of the most significant challenges facing senior education in China is the unbalanced demand and supply. Senior education resources are not sufficient to cater to the needs of the ageing society. According to a survey conducted by the Nanjing Social Science Institution in 2019, in Nanjing, 54.8% of senior universities are oversubscribed, 41.9% have just enough students, and 3.2% lack sufficient students. The survey results indicate that the supply of senior education is a complex issue, with both insufficient total supply and structural imbalance.

As discussed, some less developed provinces have fewer senior universities despite a larger number of ageing

populations. This indicates an uneven geographical and economic distribution of senior education resources. Although older adults have a high interest in learning, only a small proportion of them are willing to spend on education, which suppresses the profit, preventing the development of private senior universities.

Another challenge is educational content. The first senior universities are targeted at retired officials, catering for their leisure, entertainment, and health preservation needs. This focus of senior education has not evolved over time. As the population changes, the education content in the Senior citizens' universities should meet the demands and needs of the evolving structure of the population. As the ageing population becomes more educated and willing to acquire deep and quality knowledge, some researchers have recommended that a wider range of courses should be provided. For instance, aside from dancing and singing (popular courses), senior universities could offer education about literature, history, and natural science. In recent years, more young people are engaged in senior universities, either doing volunteer teaching or getting enrolled in some courses. More resources and management in senior education have to be monitored and supported when further developing this education sector.

Last but not least, senior education in China lacks implementation on the neighbourhood and community level. Although senior education is well-structured in national and local government strategies, a lot of neighbourhoods in cities fail to provide

attractive educational activities to older adults. While the neighbourhood parks and fitness facilities are often utilised, many community spaces for learning are not fully used. According to the Shandong Research Institute on Senior Education, as of 2018, only 11.9% of community learning centres are utilised by senior citizens.

Although senior universities are named as "universities", they are in fact special schools established to enrich the social life and meet the spiritual needs of older adults. They are products created for an ageing society and practise the concept of lifelong learning. The current development of senior education in China is still evolving, and challenges, especially relating to supply and demand issues necessitate resolution if the benefits of senior citizen education are to be actualised.

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