

A cross-cultural study in older adults' learning experience

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ABSTRACT

Objective. To investigate the differences or similarities in older adults' preferences regarding choice of courses, perceived benefits, and difficulties encountered.

Methods. A cross-cultural survey in older adults' experiences in later-life learning was conducted. Of 1585 questionnaires sent to the United States, the United Kingdom, Finland, and China, 560 (35%) were completed and returned by December 2001.

Results. About 67% of the respondents were interested in hobby/interest courses and 56% preferred knowledge-driven courses. There was a significant difference in course choices among the four countries ($p < 0.05$). Most older adults learned for personal satisfaction and social network building. Only 8% of respondents claimed that they had difficulties in keeping up with the pace of learning. Lack of time and problems of travelling, health, and financial constraints were difficulties encountered by older adults during learning; the differences between the four countries were significant ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusion. Discussion is made on cultural difference in later-life learning. The findings of this survey provide insights for the future formulation of learning environments for older adults.

Key words: Aged; Cross-cultural comparison; Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Being a global phenomenon, ageing populations create challenges not only in terms of retirement protection and health care, but also from the perspective of their learning needs. Many older adults actively participate in various types of learning after retirement (later-life learning) and such activity has already drawn the attention of many governments, educators, gerontologists, and even older adults themselves. Many governments including those of Finland, the United Kingdom, and China believe that later-life learning may preserve older people's physical and cognitive functional abilities, and hence reduce their dependence and demands on health services.¹ Educators and gerontologists view this as a means by which older adults can reduce the negative impact of lifestyle changes by helping older people develop coping strategies, whilst also

providing them with a variety of new interests and/or social contacts.² Such consequences have been amply illustrated by older adults who have provided their own vivid testimonies.³ The benefits of learning extend to feeling really alive (mentally and physically) through the exercise of self-discipline to fulfil the course requirements, which includes getting up and getting going, reading, writing, and questioning with increasing awareness.

Later-life learning is an unfinished debate taking various forms at different places and by a heterogeneous groups having different backgrounds, experiences, and social status.⁴ Many studies⁵⁻¹¹ have reported on older adults' learning needs and experiences, but most focus on a single cohort of subjects living in a particular region. To compare the views of older adults with different cultural backgrounds and economic development, and identify common

TABLE 1
Response rates to the survey

	No. of questionnaires		
	Sent	Completed	Response rate (%)
UK	450	60	13
US	450	52	12
Finland	135	62	46
China	550	386	70
Total	1585	560	35

features or differences in their perceptions and experience may be of more interest and relevance.

This survey in older adults was therefore undertaken in the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), Finland, and China during the inclusive period from September to December 2001 and set out to answer the following research questions:

1. Are there any differences or similarities between the four selected countries with respect to preferences for the types of courses?
2. Are there any differences or similarities between the four selected countries with respect to the perception of benefits of learning?
3. Are there any differences or similarities between the four selected countries with respect to the difficulties encountered during learning?

METHODS

This study focused on structured learning (in the form of courses) and was carried out as a survey offered to older adults. Accordingly, it was directed at attendees of courses run by the University for the Third Age (U3A) or Institutes for Learning in Retirement (ILR).

Sample

Based on searching the Internet, 15 ILRs in the US and 15 U3As in the UK were randomly selected so long as they provided either an e-mail or postal address. All nine U3As in Finland were included. Due to the constraints of conducting any survey in China, only two U3As in Shanghai and Beijing were included. Older people in these learning institutes who had taken or were taking at least one course in the last 12 months were invited to fill in the questionnaires. All participants understood that the completion of the questionnaires was on a voluntary basis and that respondents had to be cognitively

intact in order to understand the questionnaires.

Instrument and data analysis

A three-part 14-item questionnaire in English and a version in Chinese were developed. For the Chinese version, back translation of the questionnaire was carried out to exclude discrepancies in the meaning. Pilot testing of the questionnaire was carried out in 35 older adults in Hong Kong and revised based on their comments. Items in the final questionnaire included: general information, preferences for learning, perceived benefits of later-life learning, and difficulties encountered in the pursuit of such learning. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (Windows version 10.0; SPSS Inc, Chicago [IL], US) was used. For statistical analysis, we have looked into the percentage of the data and conducted Chi squared tests.

RESULTS

Of 1585 questionnaires sent out to the UK, US, Finland, and China, 560 (35%) were completed and returned by December 2001. The corresponding response rates and the demographic data of the respondents are shown in TABLES 1 and 2, respectively. Among the respondents, 64% were females and 36% males. The percentage of older learners (>70 years old) among respondents was highest in the US (54%), followed by the UK (43%). There was a significant difference between countries in terms of respondents' ages ($X^2[9, 557]=55.9, p<0.001$); they were younger in China, where 30% were aged younger than 60 years and 29% were aged 60 to 65 years. There was also a significant difference in educational level ($X^2[3, 540]=92.9, p<0.001$); among the respondents US older learners had the highest education level (at tertiary) [100%], while most (about 60%) from China had attained secondary education or below.

TABLE 2
Demographic data of the respondents

	UK	US	Finland	China	Overall
Sex (n=551)					
Male	44%	35%	17%	38%	36%
Female	56%	65%	83%	62%	64%
Age (years) [n=557]*					
<60	7%	8%	7%	30%	23%
60-65	23%	25%	36%	29%	28%
66-70	27%	13%	31%	18%	20%
>70	43%	54%	26%	23%	29%
Educational level (n=540)†					
Secondary or below	30%	0%	78%	60%	53%
Tertiary or above	70%	100%	22%	40%	47%

* $\chi^2(9, 557)=55.9, p<0.001$

† $\chi^2(3, 540)=92.9, p<0.001$

TABLE 3
Preferences for the types of courses (n=914)*

	UK	US	Finland	China	Overall
Hobby/interest courses (e.g. painting, dancing); $\chi^2(3, 355)=13.0, p<0.05$	73%	54%	47%	66%	67%
Knowledge-driven courses (e.g. language, health-related); $\chi^2(3, 310)=12.7, p<0.05$	68%	72%	60%	51%	56%
Skills courses (e.g. computer, home maintenance)	36%	40%	37%	28%	31%
Courses leading to recognised qualifications (e.g. certification, diploma); Fisher's exact test (63)=23.1, $p<0.001$	0%	8%	2%	15%	11%
Courses leading to re-employment (e.g. office administration course)	0%	4%	2%	3%	3%

* Percentage within countries is shown

The major research outcomes can be classified into three parts: (1) preferences in the types of courses, (2) perception of benefits of learning, and (3) difficulties encountered during learning.

Preferences for types of courses

Each individual could exercise more than one choice, so that the total number of responses (914) exceeded the total number of respondents (560). In all, 67% of respondents were interested in hobby/interest courses and 56% in knowledge-driven courses, whereas courses leading to recognised qualifications were less popular (TABLE 3). There were statistically significant differences between the respective responses from the four countries and preferences for knowledge-driven courses, hobby/interest courses, and courses leading to recognised qualifications (TABLE 3). Regarding interest in courses leading to recognised qualifications, their popularity among Chinese older adults was compared to those

from the US and Finland (TABLE 3) and was explored further by examining the relationship between preferences for such courses and age. Thus 38% of the Chinese respondents who showed preference to these courses were aged 70 years or more, compared to only 12% among those aged 60 years or below ($\chi^2[3, 384]=13.4, p<0.005$). Skills courses were weakly correlated to educational level ($\chi^2[1, 537]=6.1, p<0.05$ and Cramer's $V=0.107$) and age ($\chi^2[3, 554]=10.2, p<0.05$ and Cramer's $V=0.136$).

Perception of benefits of learning

Each individual could exercise more than one choice when asked about the perceived benefits of learning so that the number of response (1903) exceeded the total number of respondents (560). Older adults from different countries had a variety of views on the perceived benefits of learning (TABLE 4). Most asserted that they learned for the sake of knowledge, personal satisfaction, and social network building.

TABLE 4
Respondents' perceived benefits of learning (n=1903)*

	UK	US	Finland	China	Overall
Gain some knowledge	80%	96%	79%	84%	84%
Develop personal interest/hobby; $X^2(3, 369)=13.1, p<0.05$	82%	62%	77%	62%	66%
Make life more productive	57%	54%	47%	61%	58%
Meet more people; $X^2(3, 309)=55.2, p<0.005$	85%	81%	68%	45%	55%
Fill up time; $X^2(3, 190)=18.0, p<0.005$	22%	14%	32%	39%	34%
Know more about changing world; $X^2(3, 167)=132.9, p<0.005$	45%	69%	71%	15%	30%
Obtain qualification; Fisher's exact test (49)=13.3, $p<0.005$	2%	2%	3%	12%	9%
Prepare for re-employment; Fisher's exact test (22)=9.3, $p<0.05$	0%	0%	0%	6%	4%

* Percentage within countries is shown

TABLE 5
Difficulties encountered by respondents during learning (n=529)*

	UK	US	Finland	China	Overall
Health/physical problems; $X^2(3, 123)=51.8, p<0.001$	8%	0%	53%	22%	22%
Lack of time; $X^2(3, 144)=18.9, p<0.001$	52%	31%	21%	24%	27%
Problems to follow the teaching pace; Fisher's exact test (24)=8.42, $p<0.05$	15%	0%	11%	8%	8%
Financial problems; $X^2(3, 78)=24.9, p<0.001$	2%	4%	2%	19%	14%
Travelling problems; $X^2(3, 140)=25.4, p<0.001$	8%	7%	42%	28%	26%

* Percentage within countries is shown

More elderly people in the UK (82%) and in Finland (77%) than in the US (62%) and China (62%) intended to develop personal interests or hobbies after retirement. On the other hand, 6% of Chinese older adults surveyed perceived that later-life learning can provide a second opportunity to join the workforce, while none in the UK, US, or Finland had the same perception. Such a perception correlated weakly with financial problems; $X^2(1, 541)=8.95, p<0.005$ and Cramer's $V=0.129$. In addition, there were highly significant differences with respect to responses from the four countries for the following perceived benefits: 'meeting more people', 'filling up time', 'knowing more about the changing world', and 'obtaining a qualification'. Yet, there was no difference among the countries with respect to 'gain some knowledge' and 'make life more productive' as perceived benefits of learning.

Difficulties encountered during learning

TABLE 5 summarises the difficulties encountered by the older adults during learning. Only 8% of respondents indicated they had difficulties in keeping up with the learning pace. Lack of time as well as travelling, health, and financial problems were identified most frequently, yet there was a signifi-

cant difference among the four countries. More elderly people in Finland and China had health/physical problems (53% and 22% respectively) as well as travelling problems (42% and 28% respectively). On the contrary, more elderly people in the UK (52%) and the US (31%) felt that they lacked time for learning.

DISCUSSION

The following similarities and differences between respondents' views in the four countries could be identified:

1. Most were interested in hobby/interest courses and knowledge-driven courses, whereas those leading to recognised qualifications or re-employment were less popular. However, skills courses (such as on computers, or home maintenance) were similarly acceptable to older adults from the four countries. Those tending to choose skills courses had usually received tertiary education or were likely to be relatively young, which suggests that their self-confidence may have been a crucial factor.
2. Chinese respondents had a significantly greater preference for courses leading to recognised qualifications, which may be a cultural East-West

difference. Older Chinese adults (≥ 70 years) were keener to look for courses leading to qualifications. This finding contradicts our general assumption that the younger old will look for courses leading to qualification, and with such qualification, they could look for re-employment.

3. Some Chinese older adults perceived later-life learning as an opportunity for preparing for re-employment while none expressed this view from the UK, US, and Finland. It seems that the financial status of the respective respondents had some effect on this perception of later-life learning. Older adults with less financial support after retirement appeared particularly concerned about this instrumental outcome of learning and were motivated by reasons of career advancement or skills-building.⁹
4. Regarding difficulties encountered during learning, the most prominent problems were 'lack of time' and 'travelling'. 'Lack of time' refers to insufficient time to cover the syllabus. Course providers may consider lengthening the course or reducing the course content to allow for this. Running courses near the neighbourhoods where older adults live as well as distance learning (involving television broadcasts and related learning materials) may provide feasible alternatives for overcoming travel problems.¹⁰
5. Interestingly more than half of the respondents from Finland indicated having health or physical problems, which was a much higher proportion than in the other three countries (TABLE 5). Although there were no clues found on why the Finnish elderly people "were having poor health" but still willing to participate in later-life learning, it seemed that probably this may reflect health problems were not perceived to be a barrier to learning if the older adults are so keen to learn. Older adults inevitably face some difficulties in learning, but they still considered their participation in later-life learning as a happy and enriching experience.

Limitation

Cautious interpretation of the data is warranted, as the response rate to the questionnaires was low, particularly from the UK, US, and Finland. Moreover, there were significant differences in the ages and educational attainments of the respondents from the four countries. This may be a consequence of the

respondents being self-selected. The research team made every effort to contact most of the organisations which provide learning to older adults in the four selected countries. E-mail and telephone communication was frequently used with the U3As/ILRs and postage charges were provided to the respondents so as to encourage them to return the completed questionnaire survey. These measures were instituted to facilitate sampling of this study as the most representative of total populations.

CONCLUSION

Later-life learning is well accepted by older adults around the world. In this survey, the four selected countries have similar as well as differing preferences for the types of courses, perception of the benefits from later-life learning, and the difficulties encountered. Most older adults preferred hobby/interest and knowledge-driven courses. Those having higher levels of education and younger subjects preferred skills courses. The majority of older adults asserted they undertook such learning for personal satisfaction and social network building. In China in which a few older adults perceived later-life learning as an opportunity to acquire skills for re-employment. The correlation between this perception and financial problems suggests a possible motivation. It seems that older adults are facing different kinds of problems during learning, but they are still willing to participate in such activity. Government and university support may help encourage more elderly people (even those who are sick) to participate in later-life learning, so as to allow them to gain new knowledge, increase their social contacts, and nurture confidence to develop their intellectual potential and interests after retirement. These elements are essential considerations relevant to the quality of life of older adults.

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