

# It's back to school for these active seniors

The senior-education sector is growing, with courses ranging from photography to IT

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Mr Cheong Choon Hee, 72, never dreamed that he would go back to school after he quit his studies in Primary 6.

But in July last year, he did just that. He signed up for classes at Yah! Community College at Jurong Point.

For four months, he joined other senior citizens to learn about topics such as communication and how to deal with death.

At the end of last year, he donned a graduation gown to receive a lifelong learning certificate.

It was a proud moment for him. "The whole experience was emotionally fulfilling and showed me that I can still learn and lead an active life," said Mr Cheong. The former owner of a textile business is married with four children.

The senior-education sector has been growing over the last few years. Yah! or Young-At-Heart! Community College was started in 2005 by the Marine Parade Family Service Centre. So far, 1,088 students have attended its courses.

The Active Ageing Academy (AAA), under Fei Yue Community Services, was launched in 2008. Based in Bukit Batok, it offers six-month courses taught in Mandarin, on subjects such as mental wellness and basic counselling.

The course costs \$450 and AAA has had close to 240 students.

Fei Yue also launched an English version of the AAA on May 8, called Golden Age College. Said Mr Sammy How, senior executive of Fei Yue: "We felt that English-learning opportunities should be made available to seniors, especially to the non-Mandarin speaking groups such as Malays, Indians and Eurasians."

There are also other places which offer shorter courses in subjects such as photography, IT and drawing.

The Retired & Senior Volunteer Programme (RSVP) has trained more than 1,200 people in IT courses, launched in 1998, and 120 seniors in photography courses, launched last year.

At the launch of the Golden Age College, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Lim Boon Heng said: "Lifelong education keeps the mind active and continuous learning ensures one can stay active and engaged in life."

Indeed, seniors give the thumbs up to such courses.

Mr Chhua Bak Siang, 61, who owns a publishing firm, completed a six-month course at AAA in 2008. "It has taught me how to live happily and communicate with my family and understand people better. This helps a lot both at home and in business."

Others hope to monetise what they have learnt. Retiree Theresa Kam, 59, is taking a course in Microsoft Excel under RSVP to help her look for part-time work.

"I think it's good for me to upgrade. Because these classes cater to seniors, they explain things more slowly," she said of the 10-lesson training which costs \$100.

Seniors are easy to teach, said educators. Said Mr Jim Then, 64, a training manager with the Centre for Seniors: "They already have lots of experience so rather than being 'taught', they prefer if you 'share' things with them."

Said Madam Goh Ai Yat, 53, who teaches an introductory course on how to plan for retirement: "I have to prove my credibility with older people because they want to be taught by someone with actual life experience."

Added social worker, Ms Iris Lin, 28, who has been teaching at AAA for a year: "Because many of the students see education as a gift, they are even more enthusiastic and motivated than young people. They express so much gratitude for the opportunity."

Some feel that while senior education will become lucrative in years to come, it is a struggle now.

Mr Ng said it takes between \$400,000 and \$500,000 a year to run Yah! College. But he can charge students only \$300 for the 100-hour course in lifelong learning as they have complained about price rises.

Schools can get funds from bodies such as the Council for Third Age, an independent body that promotes active ageing.

The Council for Third Age said Singapore's lifelong learning landscape is complex and thriving, involving multiple players who offer a wide variety of options.

Mr Then said the Centre for Seniors, whose workshops for mature employees help them understand the ageing process, plans to be an accredited training body in about a year.

He said: "We've a vision of a more holistic programme for seniors' mental, financial and physical health. It makes sense, seeing that an ageing population is a global problem."

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Instructor Carol Lim (left), 52, leading Mr Cheong Choon Hee, 72, and other participants in a song and dance at the Yah! Community College at Jurong Point. Since the college opened in 2005, 1,088 seniors have attended its courses.

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## MAKE IT EASIER FOR THE ELDERLY

Singapore has come a long way in making public facilities more senior-friendly but there is still room for improvement, ageing experts and senior citizens said.

They were responding to the draft recommendations released last week by a focus group set up by the Urban Redevelopment Authority to look at what can be done to improve the quality of life.

Below is a wish-list of what seniors want.

### 1 More road crossings instead of overhead bridges

Service staff Ron Menon, 68, thinks there should be more traffic light crossings instead of overhead bridges.

"They are the worst. Is there an alternative for us older people? Or maybe the authorities can consider making the steps for future overhead bridges less steep, because they are very difficult to climb right now."

### 2 Senior-friendly public buses

Operators have rolled out buses with low steps and a single-level aisle. But more should be on the roads, said teacher Elena Choy, 65. "All buses should be step-free. It's very hard for older people to climb the steps, especially when the buses are moving. Lower floors and no raised platforms would also make our riding experience more comfortable."

### 3 Buildings with facilities like ramps and accessible lifts

Ms Susana Concoro, assistant director of inter-agency



Madam Cecilia Evelyn Koh, 71, has trouble using the stairs at Braddell MRT station after suffering a stroke last year. The station entrance closest to her home has an escalator that goes up, but not down.

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collaborations, Tsao Foundation, said: "Many (buildings) are still without accessible lifts, ramps and railings."

Nominated MP Laurence Wee, 63, feels more can be done at the design stage. "On paper, they may have included barrier-free facilities but they may not be functional. For instance, they may build a ramp but it doesn't connect you to other parts of the building smoothly. They should invite elderly people or the disabled to test it out."

### 4 Pedestrian crossing lights that stay green longer

Mr Wee, who is immediate past president of the Gerontological Society, feels that the lights should stay green longer for pedestrians.

"Older people walk slower. When the light changes so quickly, they get flustered because they have to dash across the road. Also, some motorists drive off very quickly and that can be dangerous for pedestrians."

### 5 Rest areas in public places

Retiree Liang Siew Ping, 71, thinks there should be more such areas provided in public places.

"It's quite difficult for me to accompany my children and grandchildren when they shop and do other things. I would like to see more places for older people like me to sit, catch my breath and wait for my family to run errands," she said.

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