

Benefits for the elderly education essay



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The number of elderly workers in India has increased from 20 million in 1983 to 30 million in 2004- 2005, with over 80 percent belonging to the rural areas and 23 percent of the elderly population in involved in workforce participation in 2004-2005 in the urban areas. The elderly constitute 7 percent of the total working population in India.

Ageing is a multifaceted construct involving biological, physiological, organizational, social, political, familial, communal, cultural and global characteristics and it is difficult to provide a condensed view of such an expansive paradigm. For practical purposes people at the age of 60 are considered as ‘ senior citizens’ and that is the general retirement age in India. However, as we are talking about the course of ageing, the definition of an ageing worker is based around the time that people start to experience major changes in their work life (Illmarinen, 2001). Thus, the ageing worker here is identified as beginning from 45 to 50 years as that is generally taken as the base criterion (Illmarinen, 2001).

According to the UNFPA survey published in 2012, half of the elderly population report that they have not had any formal education (Selvaraj, Karan and Madheswaran, 2011). Ladusingh and Narayana (2011), report that the public funding for education is mainly consumed by the young. India is in need of institutions proficient in supporting a structured and formal life long process of learning, including the elderly. A common means of education for the elderly is through enrollment into distance learning institutes. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) is one of the largest institutes catering to over four million distance learners with twenty one schools of studies across sixty seven regional centers and three thousand learner

support centers. Even with such an impressive record the elderly student population seems to be minimal. In a study conducted by Sivaswaroop (2001) in Hyderabad region of India it was found that out of 64884 students who enrolled in courses from 1991-2000 only 72 were above the age of 55 which is a mere 0.11% and out of these 72 only 4% were female.

Consequently, the ageing population and their education is fast becoming one of the most popular social issues of the current and future era.

The demographic changes mean that the skills and knowledge of the older workers need to be developed and utilized. As supported by the data many older workers are at the height of their careers and not at the end of it. It has been found that the elderly, who work, do it on a full time basis for a minimum of six months of the year and this comes from a necessity to earn an income (UNPFA, 2011). Therefore, a majority of the older workforce expects to continue working even after the estimated retirement period. This suggests that developing the skill levels of older workers will have benefits for the elderly, employers and society alike. Contrary to popular belief, although the elderly workforce experiences changes in reaction time and perceptual skills, other skill areas such as memory, problem solving, creativity, general intelligence, social skills, the ability to cope with stress can be maintained and even improved through training and education (Dworschak, Buck & Schletz, 2006). Skill mismatch is identified as one of the primary factors affecting the ability of older workers to perform effectively and productively, (Cedefop, 2010) and the cognitive decline in older workers is seen as a result of being out of practice and is quite reversible (Foster, 2008). Older adults tend to perform better on task requiring crystallized

intelligence than younger adults. Crystallized intelligence includes the knowledge and skills accumulated throughout one's lifetime. Older people perform better on this through verbal abilities and judgment (Merriam, 2001). General consensus among researchers is that although the elderly may score lower on tasks related to fluid intelligence, these scores can be improved and their performance can reach parallel levels to that of younger adults once training interventions are provided for solving strategies (Baltes et. al., 1993; García-Berbén, 1995, Calero, and García-Berbén, 1997).

The institutes that offer training to the elderly population is popularly referred to as University of the Third age or U3A and the education that they receive can be divided into two broad categories namely through self training and through tutor guided training (Calero and Garcia-Berben, 1997). It has been seen that the elderly group with high educational levels benefit greatly from both the self training paradigm and the tutor guided paradigm and the group with low educational level benefits greatly from tutor guided training paradigm. The reasoning behind this that higher the educational level, the more easily abilities will emerge after little practice (Baltes et. al., 1989). In the self training model the elderly are both teachers and students, they study topics of their choice, carry out research and theoretical work, organize various activities and fashion an effective and advantageous community network. The rationale here is that experts from every field eventually retire so there is no need to retain second age teachers to communicate information and knowledge to the elderly (Laslett, 1989). This approach has been very successful in the UK, Australia and New Zealand (Swindell and Thompson, 1995).

On the other hand the tutor guided paradigm often consists of inter generational classes where the younger adults and the elderly exchange thoughts, knowledge and discussions. This is usually a pre-designed study program and offers more formal courses. Even though the elderly may be required to read and write papers from time to time they are isolated from the whole learning process. This model is popular in many countries such as France, Austria, Belgium and Germany among others. Various adaptations of these models exist around the world such as Elderhostels that originated in mid 1970s in the United States and is the largest education and travel organization for aged people today (Moody, 2004). These include courses taught by many organization, universities and colleges across the globe and offer low-cost and temporary academic residential courses. Another version of courses offered for the elderly is the Institutes for Learning in Retirement (ILR) which has been in existence since 1962. These institutes collaborate with universities and offer college level courses on a tuition-waiver basis. (Hebestreit, 2006).

With such an immense amount of effort being put into the education of the elderly worldwide and the absolute reality of the growing elderly population in India, the moment in time has arrived to introduce third age education in India. Through such an endeavor the benefits will not only be reaped by the elderly population but also by employers as well as society as a whole.

Benefits for the elderly

The elderly population which is a significant proportion of India's population has as much a right to learning and education as any other group of society. It is a far and wide accepted and recognized fact that individuals constantly

need to update their knowledge and acquire new skills in order to continue in the current climate of competitive labor markets and continually changing technological advances in almost every field. Nevertheless, this is not the only reason for elderly individuals to engage themselves in education. The vocabulary of lifelong learning and learning societies can be very confining for third age learners as they aim towards economic productivity and developing work related skills. Learning for third age learners has many extensive advantages such as improving the social well being and health of individuals. In fact this is one of the main objectives behind the Indian Society of U3A which was formed in March 2008 (Singh, 2011). It aims towards providing a holistic and meaningful ageing process through providing opportunities to the third age for sharing experiences and participating in discussions about the elderly and to construct programmes around their skills and interests. They also aim to collaborate with universities and colleges in the future to provide lifelong open learning.

Research shows that when third agers do engage in such educational activities, they show high levels of improvement in self confidence, enjoyment of life, ability to cope and satisfaction in other areas of life (Dench and Reagan, 2000). In a research conducted by Dench and Regan (2000) forty two percent of the elderly participants stated that they found an improvement in their ability of 'standing up and being heard and willingness to take on responsibility'. About eighty percent of the participants who were working participated in work related learning and it was found that learning associated with Information Technology was most common followed by work related learning. Some of the former learning was due to work requirements

but a number of people engaged in it out of personal interest. The reasons that the older students above the age of 60 usually report for engaging in learning are to keep the mind active, for personal development and to develop an interest in an area (Clennell, 1990). This body of students has been seen to be highly motivated, hardworking, organized and capable of meeting the demands of the courses they choose and there is no difference between the overall pass rates of older and younger student in open universities (Clennell, 1990; 1984).

Non-traditional students tend to do better due to their maturity, motivation, hard work, life experience and also because they are there with specific goals in mind and reluctant to waste time as a precious resource. Third age students are seen to be motivated by perceived cognitive gaps, intellectual curiosity, social relationship and self actualization (Bynum and Seaman, 1993). Older learners show a desire for training programs when they view work as an important aspect of their lives, out of financial necessity and when they work fulltime (Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser, 2008). They also prefer to use their current skills and knowledge as a basis for further learning (Ferrier et. al., 2008) In inter-generational groupings, older students get to interact with younger students and display leadership roles exposing the younger students to more mature levels, through their social and personal experiences (Whisnant et. al., 1993).

There are some typical conjectures involving elderly learners such as they require special support and teaching methods. However, evidence points to the contrary and suggests that elderly students appear to be highly motivated and organized and their performance is as good as the students of

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any other age. It is also found that though they have apprehensions about their memory, only a small number of students actually report difficulties with memory. Thus, older students' needs are reasonably similar to those of younger students and they do not need any special provision provided for them and are committed to their education (Simpson, 2000; Clennell, 1984; Sivaswaroop; 2001).

Investigations of third age education in different countries show that collectivist countries such as India, Japan and Malaysia prefer learning systems that involve awareness programmes, social, communicative and communal learning as well as that which contributes to other's well being (Sivaswaroop, 2001; Hori and Cusack, 2006; Merriem and Muhamad, 2000). In work settings, the motivations to learn stem from a sense of self-fulfillment and desire to be physically and mentally active, to learn and try new things (Towers Perrin, 2007; Pincas, 2007). They prefer to engage in programmes that have learning that is relative to the outcome (Ferrier et. al., 2008) and they want to be able to apply their newly learned skills and knowledge to their work setting, suggesting a desire for an instant result of 'return on investment' (Newton, Hurstfield, Miller and Bates 2005).

Keeping these features in mind educational programs designed around enhancing skills and knowledge and satisfying intellectual curiosity, which are unrestrained and collective, practical and functional in nature and aimed at self actualization of the individuals is crucial.