Tianjin | Universities for the Third Age

Lifelong Learning for Seniors, by Seniors

With seniors receiving better education, "retirement" no longer means the end of a person's active contributions to the economy and community. As Tianjin's University for the Elderly shows, seniors still have much to learn and to teach.

The Challenge

The worldwide surge in ageing populations has pressured cities to up their game in providing for the elderly. In China, one in five persons will be aged 65 years and above by 2030—double the ratio of one in 10 in 2010. Most ageing-related urban solutions, such as universal design, focus on physical infrastructure or healthcare. But with seniors receiving better education and living longer, there is an increasing recognition that they have the capacity to contribute to the community. How then can the elderly continue to be active citizens in their retirement years?

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China needs to ensure that her ageing population stays active for as long as possible.

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The Solution

China's Universities for the Third Age (UTA, or "Universities for the Elderly") promote happiness, health, social contribution and further education among seniors. Not only do the seniors learn new skills and become more engaged with the community, they can also take on teaching and administrative roles. To this end, UTAs create an eco-system where seniors are respected as repositories of expertise and are able to be economically active, while contributing to building social networks and community bonding.

China has led in the development of UTAs since the early 1980s, with ageing-specific policies led by the Chinese National Committee on Ageing Problems, which was formed in 1982. The first UTA was set up in Shandong province in 1983 mainly for retired Communist Party cadres. The Reform and Development of Education initiative, launched in 1993, proposed adult education as a new focus and emphasised the need to develop traditional school education into lifelong education. In 1996, the Government enacted a law to give older persons the right to receive continuing education and to open up enrolment in UTAs to the public.

From 1988, the UTA network expanded beyond cities, becoming more accessible as more local branches developed. Community education is largely provided by local volunteers. Extending beyond a physical campus also complements a broader approach to ageing-in-place, which enables seniors to age in their communities

> **Extending beyond a physical campus … enables seniors to age in their communities and residences of their choice while improving quality of life and ensuring access to old-age needs.**

and residences of their choice while improving quality of life and ensuring access to old-age needs. Learning over the computer or TV allows seniors to continue lifelong learning without having to travel to a physical campus.

The development of UTAs became even more systematic in 2000, with a new directive that strengthened the national focus on the elderly, including elderly education. Private and social entities were invited to set up UTAs, and elderly education was broadened to include knowledge-based and skill-based programmes. In 2010, the National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development finalised the policy framework for comprehensive lifelong learning, and education for the elderly was officially incorporated into the national education system. The Central Government introduced a five-year plan spanning 2011 to 2015, pledging to increase investment in colleges for retirees, expand the scale of schools, and encourage social groups to jointly develop educational programmes for retirees.

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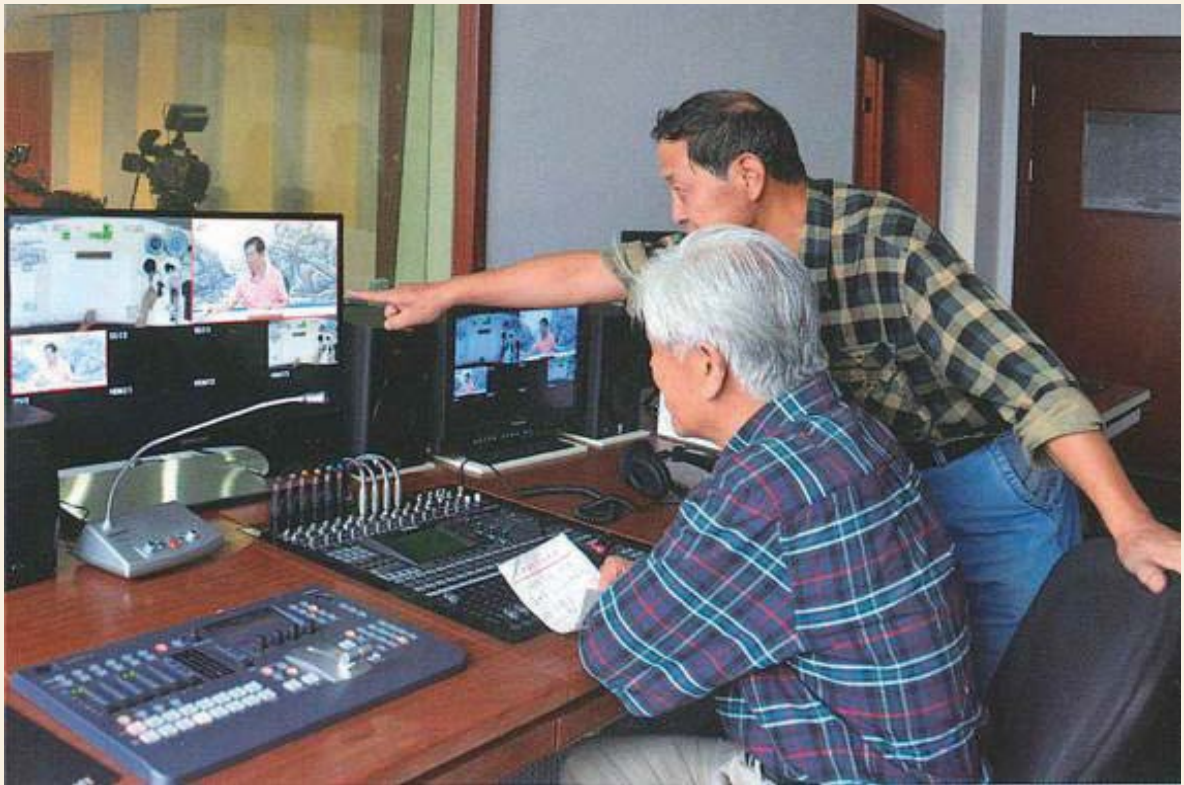
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> **Senior students and graduates also form clubs to teach other seniors and run free community classes such as for *taiji* in public parks.**

A good example of a UTA is Tianjin University for the Elderly, founded in 1985 and named China's "Most Advanced University for the Elderly" in 2011. The university has nine faculties for foreign languages, calligraphy, painting, life skills, health and fitness, medicine and healthcare, dance and drama, music and information technology. Courses are organised into basic, intermediate, advanced and professional levels. It can take up to two years to master each level.

Its current enrolment is about 26,000 students. Courses are so sought after that enrolment queues often begin a day before registration day. To meet the high demand from 18,000 seniors, the university has accredited 77 district-level UTA affiliates, with plans to expand to 150 affiliates over

01 The production of videos for distance learning.

02 Screenshot of a lesson on acupuncture, hosted on the Tianjin University website.

five years, to cater for up to 30,000 seniors. Online courses will increase from the current 50 courses for 64,000 seniors to 200 courses for one million users over five years.

Tianjin University also serves a social function as a learning community for seniors, by seniors. Seniors make up all 358 employees, of whom about 70% are faculty staff. Instructors are usually leaders in their fields (heads of professional societies or industry leaders) and serve as positive role models. Student work and interests are shared with the public in exhibitions and performances on local and national TV, public events and competitions. Senior students and graduates also form clubs to teach other seniors and run free community classes such as for *taiji* in public parks.

The Outcome

Lifelong learning has become an integral part of ageing policies in China based on the strong belief that the elderly can be equipped to contribute more to society while ageing with dignity. In 2014, there were 59,700 UTAs and 6.77 million registered students. Flexible short-term to three-year courses are heavily subsidised by the government, supplemented by donations from private sponsors and donors. Students pay a minimum fee, ranging from RMB300 to 600 (US$43 to US$87), per year per course. Currently, 28 pilot zones in provinces, municipalities and specially planned cities ensure that community education is integrated with other local facilities such as libraries and cultural centres. ⭕