

Multigenerational Co-learning and Co-creation in Action: Evaluating an Intergenerational Programme Among Older Adults, University Students, and Secondary School Students

Research Overview

This study evaluates a multigenerational programme in Hong Kong where university students and older adults were trained to co-create activities for secondary school students, fostering mutual understanding and lifelong learning. Mixed methods evaluation identified improved intergenerational communication capability and older adults' development, highlighting the bridging role of university students.

Purpose of Study

Hong Kong is a super-aged society with over 25% of the population aged 65 and above, projected to reach 36% by 2046. Rapid population ageing requires younger generations to understand the ageing process and communicate effectively with older adults, yet the shift toward nuclear families has reduced opportunities for intergenerational contact. Intergenerational programmes driven by Allport's intergroup contact theory have proved effective in enhancing mutual understanding; however, many such projects have been younger-generation-focused, lacking consideration of their potential as platforms to enhance older adults' capabilities and lifelong learning.

The Inter-Generational Engagement in Secondary Schools (i-GESS) project innovatively incorporates university students as co-learners who study intergenerational knowledge and co-create activities with older adults (six hours or more), forming intergenerational service groups to conduct meaningful activities for secondary school students (six hours or more), followed by sharing and debriefing sessions with non-participating secondary school students to extend impact (2.5 hours).

The aims of this study were to (1) evaluate the programme's effectiveness for older adults on intergenerational communication confidence, skills, and attitudes, generativity, cognitive flexibility, self-esteem, and life satisfaction; (2) explore how older adults' expectations for social engagement and development were realised; and (3) examine the bridging role of university students in fostering meaningful interactions between generations, including implementation barriers and facilitators.

Research Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods design to evaluate the programme implemented across 2 universities and 15 secondary schools in Hong Kong between 2021 and 2025. Older participants were recruited through a university-based active ageing hub. In total, 166 older adults aged 60 or above, 149 university students, and 621 secondary school students participated.

Quantitative data were collected using pre- and post-programme surveys. For older

adults, measures included intergenerational communication confidence and skills, attitudes toward the younger generation (5-item Seniors' Attitudes Toward Children), generativity (6-item Loyola Generativity Scale), cognitive flexibility (7-item Cognitive Flexibility Scale), self-esteem (10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale), and life satisfaction (5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale). For university and secondary school students, intergenerational communication confidence and skills and attitudes toward the older generation (34-item Kogan's Attitudes Toward Older People Scale) were measured. Paired-sample t-tests were used to assess pre-post changes.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 37 older adult participants, exploring perceived benefits, expectations regarding co-learning and intergenerational interaction, and participation experiences. Thematic analysis identified recurring patterns and themes.

Results and Discussion

Older adults showed significantly enhanced communication confidence ($p < 0.01$), skills ($p < 0.001$), and attitudes toward younger generations ($p < 0.001$), as well as generativity ($p < 0.001$), cognitive flexibility ($p < 0.01$), self-esteem ($p < 0.05$), and life satisfaction ($p < 0.01$). These findings suggest the programme not only enhanced intergenerational communication but also supported broader lifelong learning outcomes, including adaptive thinking, psychological growth, and well-being. University students and secondary school students also showed improved attitudes toward older people (both $p < 0.001$), communication confidence (both $p < 0.01$), and communication skills (both $p < 0.001$), indicating enhanced mutual understanding.

Qualitative findings provided further insight into underlying processes. Older adults described becoming more open, adaptable, and receptive to new perspectives, indicating enhanced cognitive flexibility. They demonstrated greater reflexivity by interpreting intergenerational differences within broader social and cultural contexts. Recognition as capable and knowledgeable contributors enhanced self-esteem, while meaningful transfer of life experiences to younger participants strengthened generativity.

Beyond immediate programme effects, older adults valued jointly designing activities with university students and held strong expectations for sustained learning opportunities. Many endorsed lifelong learning and expressed motivation to continue engaging, preferring more frequent, longer-term involvement with diverse formats — suggesting the programme not only met their expectations for social engagement but also generated desire for continued development. Participants also highlighted practical gains from learning through practice, particularly in technology use and contemporary communication.

Several facilitators supported effective engagement. Central was the bridging role of university students, who acted as intermediaries to translate perspectives across generations and reduce interactional barriers. Additional facilitators included

interactive and game-based activity design, gradual engagement of secondary school students, proactive strategies adopted by older adults, and support from school staff and programme organisers. Key barriers included limited preparation time, unclear role division, inconsistent participation, initial disengagement among secondary school students, and logistical constraints within school settings.

Taken together, these findings suggest that multigenerational programmes involving co-learning and co-creation can function as dynamic platforms for lifelong learning. The inclusion of university students as a bridging generation creates two layers of meaningful interaction, enabling older adults to realise learning goals while fostering knowledge exchange and communication development across generations.