Institute of Policy Studies

Report on the AGE Workshop cum Expert Group Meeting: Capability Building in Social Gerontology and Translational Research in Asia 15-16 November 2011

By Ng Kok Hoe*

* *Ng Kok Hoe, a PhD student of the Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science, was attached to IPS over the period September – November 2011 while he was on a LSE-NUS Research Exchange programme for his doctoral research.*

Introduction

On 15-16 November, the Council for Third Age and the Institute of Policy Studies jointly organized the Asian Gerontology Experience (AGE) Workshop cum Expert Group Meeting. Participants included international and regional experts who explored the related themes of advancing social gerontology through education, training, and research. The central message from the presenters was the need to develop knowledge in a way that is relevant to policy and practice, in particular social service and healthcare programming. The strategy for achieving this—translational research—and the challenges it faces became the common thread as participants shared conceptual models, local experiences, and proposals.

In the keynote address, Ms Thelma Kay drew out the priorities and challenges facing social gerontology in Asia. She made three key points. First, drawing on her background as the former Director of the Social Development Division at UNESCAP, she highlighted the progressiveness of the thinking on ageing issues at the international level. These can be seen in broad efforts to frame ageing issues, such as the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) which advocated the integration of ageing concerns with social development approaches, as well as more execution-oriented initiatives like the Shanghai Implementation Plan which covered data-gathering frameworks and NGO participation. Yet progress is uneven at the national level. For instance, social gerontology training often lagged behind geriatrics training, particularly in developing Asia. Ms Kay challenged researchers to make their work influential on the policy process and to put ageing on the agenda of political entities like ASEAN.

Education and Training in Social Gerontology

In a review of over 250 educational institutions, Dr Alfred Chan found that gerontology is still not a common course offering among universities internationally. Where it is offered, the teaching often focuses only on selected aspects of gerontology, such as biological ageing and care provision, or takes the form of

specialisations within other disciplines such as health science and nursing. He called for a new applied social gerontology diploma programme in Asia Pacific to prepare professionals wishing to enter a career in elderly social services. The one-year course should cover life cycle theory, introductory sociology, and policy considerations for ageing societies such as in health, social care, and housing. He emphasised the cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity across societies even within Asia, and proposed a flexible modular approach that combined a core curriculum with varied electives that account for the unique ageing experiences of individual societies. In the same session, Professor Tri Budi shared about past collaborations between the Ageing Research Centre in Indonesia and schools in Loughborough and Oxford to cultivate postgraduate students. She also suggested that educational efforts in future could focus on intersections between social gerontology, medical gerontology and gero-technology.

Tengku Aizan Hamid presented three models of education using the example of Malaysia. First, in terms of gerontological education, Universiti Putra Malaysis has taken the lead by establishing the Institute of Gerontology in 2002 that is currently the only institute of higher learning to offer academic degrees in gerontology in Malaysia. The institute faces the challenge of recruiting students into both the Masters and doctoral programmes. The second model is retirement-preparation training for mature workers among university staff as well as in private corporations. The course covers early preparation in areas such as health and spirituality, as well as retraining and skills upgrading for sustaining employment. Third, the institute promotes lifelong learning among older adults through the University of the Third Age, which does not confer degrees but instead provides education for leisure and personal growth, through courses on topics like nutrition and assistive technology.

The two papers attracted comments from discussants who shared experiences from other countries, such as Singapore. Dr Aline Wong from SIM University, which recently launched a Master of Gerontology course, suggested that the range and delivery of gerontological training should match the target student group. For example, university-based degree courses are more appropriate for managers and leaders in gerontology-related fields, while certificate and diploma courses taught at academies may be more useful for current practitioners and service providers. Professor Peggy Wei from Taiwan spoke about various forms of educational programmes—academic, practitioner-focused, and those catering for older learners. She suggested that educational providers for older people should consider their ways of knowing and learning. A proven strategy has been to target those aged 45 and above, segmented by socioeconomic profile. Dr Phua Kai Hong observed that the ageing agenda in Singapore relies heavily on government direction and urged universities to take a more active stance. He pointed out that academics can help to inform policy directions by initiating thinking, and have important roles not just in teaching and research, but also in service through consultancy and in society at large by providing intellectual leadership and authority.

Building Research Capability

Two common themes emerged from Professor Helen Bartlett's paper and Professor Simon Biggs' response. Firstly, considerable progress has been achieved

in gerontological research in Australia over the past decade. The International Year of Older Persons in 1999 and other international developments marked the beginning of a period of capacity building in ageing research at the national level, reflected in strategic papers released in the early 2000s, such as the National Strategy for an Ageing Australia. Prominent efforts include the Building Ageing Research Capacity (BARC) project in 2003 which stimulated collaboration and organised major national symposia in 2003 and 2006, and the Emerging Researchers in Ageing (ERA) initiative that provides a forum for research students to network and collaborate. Secondly, research development has now reached a stage where it needs fresh impetus. Although there are approximately 30 university-based ageing research centres in Australia today, most are small, have time-limited funding, and do not work well together. Universities have also faced difficulties attracting enrolment for ageing-specific courses. Professor Biggs suggested that the field of gerontology may itself be growing old and needs to develop a new cohort of gerontologists.

Professor Barry Halliwell, Deputy President of the National University of Singapore, proposed a strategy for advancing the gerontological research agenda in Singapore. For the government, work and productivity are foremost concerns. Therefore economic arguments are important to promoting gerontological research, not just social arguments. The goal has to be one of developing social, behavioural, economic, and technological interventions to delay the average age of infirmity and retirement. Research to identify factors for ageing well can help elderly persons to remain in the workforce, control public healthcare expenditure, and create new markets and growth opportunities for elderly-related services. This approach can galvanise and energise policymakers and the research community. Ageing is currently one of five thematic NUS research clusters, with more than 200 researchers from 50 research units coming together through the Virtual Institute for the Study of Ageing (VISA). The key to building ageing research will be the coming together of government, industry, and charities, with the university playing a role in the examination of issues and evidence.

Mrs Susana Concordo Harding presented the NGO perspective on research capability building in her paper on the International Longevity Centre-Singapore (ILC-Singapore). Since 1993, the Tsao Foundation, which set up the ILC-Singapore, has been advocating on elderly issues and promoting research by sponsoring student awards and hosting visiting experts. She identified as priorities the nurturing of junior researchers to conduct cross-disciplinary and culturally-informed research, as well as service evaluation that can be readily applied to enhance programme delivery. Ms Wang Xiao Yan, who heads a China-based NGO, echoed the call to develop a younger generation of researchers. But she also pointed out considerations unique to China, such as the importance of public research funding since the government plays a central role in most aspects of public life, and the need to

engage local governments which control policy implementation within communities. Both speakers urged researchers to listen to older people's views when developing their research agenda.

Translational Research

Professor Simon Biggs opened the discussion on translational research by tracing its roots in bioscience, with the rationale of bringing research from bench to bedside. Translational research in social science, on the other hand, is a mixture of the moralising advocacy agenda of social agencies and the scientific evidence base that justifies political action. He then presented examples of interconnection, application, and influence in social gerontological research. For instance, the Ageing Research at King's intiative, centred at the Institute of Gerontology, provided a common language, identity, and collaborative platform to researchers on ageing from different disciplines. It led to an alliance between bioscience, clinical, and social science institutes over time and shared PhD supervision for a new cohort of gerontology researchers. In Australia, the Brotherhood of St. Laurence, an anti-poverty pressure group, collaborated with the University of Melbourne by sponsoring university professors who worked part-time at the Brotherhood. That helped to develop a research culture at the Brotherhood and combined the social kudos of charity work with a hard evidence base. One of the outcomes was a user-friendly monitor of social exclusion, which proved to be useful for influencing the government.

In contrast, translational research faces different challenges in developing Asian countries. Dr Giang Thanh Long shared that from his experience in Vietnam, the first challenge is to produce high quality and timely research. Developing Asian countries often have limited financial and human resources. Since 1995, there have only been about 40 papers published on ageing. The pace of ageing research is lagging behind the pace of population ageing in the region. The second challenge is for the research to reach policymakers. Many policymakers perceive researchers to be academic instead of practical, and do not pay attention to their work. The government also tends to prefer simple findings and recommendations instead of theoretical or technical information. In Korea, one of the forms of translational research has been a range of educational programmes for older people that arose from community-based research collaborations. In her comments, Professor Han Gyounghae also highlighted opportunities to engage governments and corporations through research by targeting issues that are of mutual interest, such as social isolation and next-generation vehicles.

In the final paper of the workshop, Professor Ng Tze Pin explained that translational social research is borne of the perceived failure of theoretical research to address practical problems, and of the gap between research findings and social service provision. One of the barriers to realising translational research is that academic culture sometimes prizes social theories over more pragmatic field research. This can create an impression of elitism and obscurity, and result in practitioners regarding research as irrelevant. Collaboration between researchers and practitioners may be hampered by the costs of fieldwork associated with research that is closer to the ground, or by practitioners' lack of preparation for the demands of rigorous research. He proposed that advancing translational research would require the development of a research culture. This

includes the inculcation of research thinking across all activities, such as education, policy planning, and service improvement. Research activities must be "expected, valued and rewarded", and translational research activities need to be accompanied by research translation activities. In their responses, Dr Takao Suzuki gave examples of translational research in the form of randomised control trials in Japan on the prevention of geriatric syndromes such as falls, incontinence, and dementia, while Dr Nugroho Abikusno reported on a literature review of educational gerontology covering education for older persons, for practitioners, and for the public, and called for greater networking in the region.

Conclusion

The AGE workshop provided a timely opportunity to review the progress and challenges in the field of social gerontology in this region, just as ageing issues are gaining increasing prominence in public discourse and policy circles. In the area of education and training, the participants noted an increase in academic degree courses in gerontology in recent years. But it remains a challenge to attract students into the courses. Internationally, it is still more common for ageing-related courses to fall within the curriculum of other disciplines. Efforts to build research capability are well underway in the region, in the form of research centres, research events, and even student networks. However the participants agreed that the research community needs to nurture the next generation of gerontology researchers. In some contexts, pointing out the possible economic benefits of ageing research, such as in helping older adults to stay in the workforce and remain in good health, may persuade policymakers to give greater support to research efforts. Translational research that brings knowledge to bear on real world problems will be particularly important as a conduit between academic endeavour, policy concerns, and service efficacy. Much more needs to be done in this respect to develop a culture that embraces research. Academics can contribute by paying greater attention to research translation and how they can make their work more influential on the policy processes in their societies.

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If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.enews@nus.edu.sg