

# The road to learning is paved with good intentions

## *Identifying Barriers to Older Adult Learning in Singapore*

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# Older learners and the NSA study

- Older adults (n=558) who were taking NSA courses at the time of quantitative and qualitative interviews conducted between Jan 2017 - Dec 2018
- 48 participants enrolled into the qualitative study to gain a deeper understanding of older adults' learning experiences
- Between course completion and post-6 months, about 60% (n=372) of the participants enrolled in new courses

# Why are older learners not continuing with their learning?

- Participants from the NSA Study were asked:
  - Did you enrol in any NSA course since the last course?
  - Are you planning to take more courses in the future?
  - Why or Why not?

## Quantitative survey (n= 558)

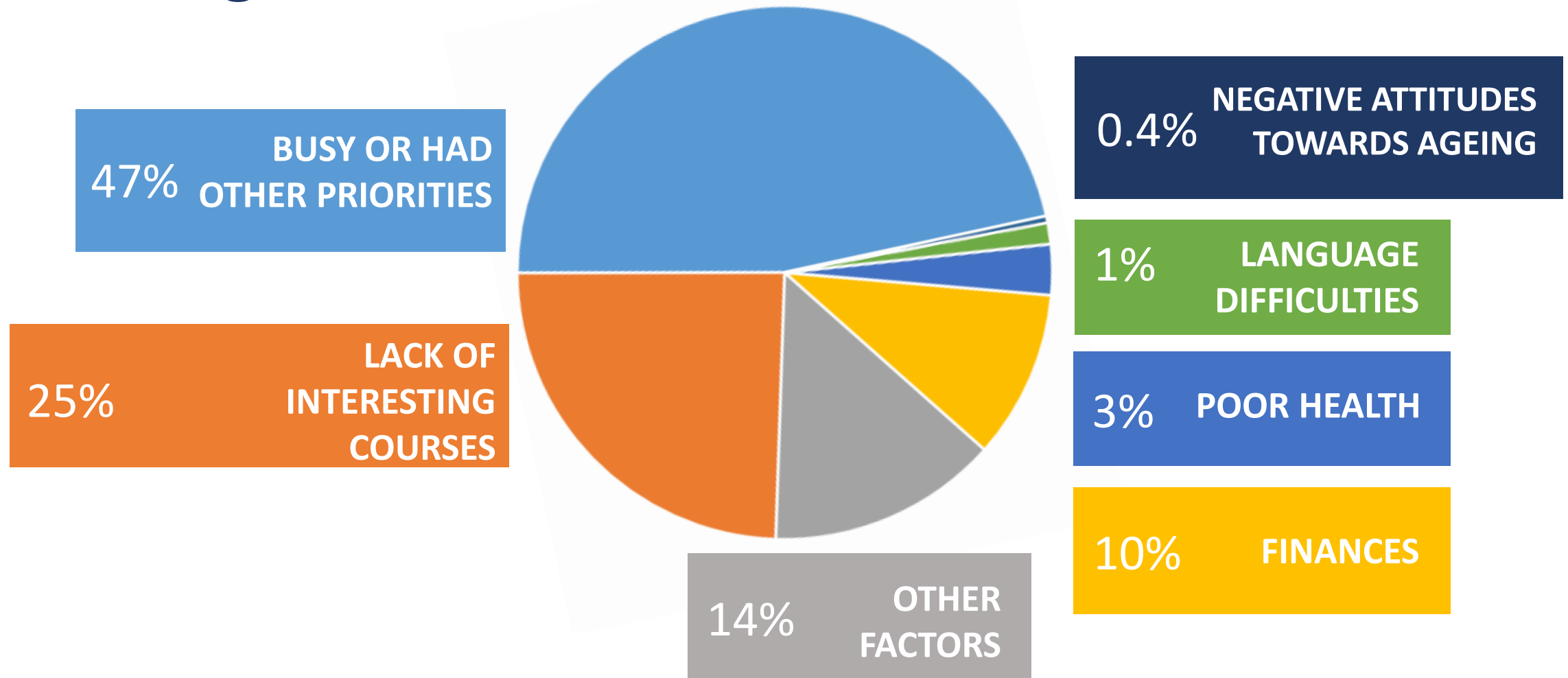
256 responses coded from 186 (40%) participants who did not enrol in any NSA course post-index course

## Qualitative in-depth interviews (n=48)

47 references from 29 participants (60%) who were not planning to enrol in any NSA course post-index course

# Main reasons why participants stopped learning

(quant study n=186)



# Conflict with work commitments

“You cannot be taking the leave just to attend to the course you see? I think companies also got to be supportive, play along with NSA campaign that the government has given to all the seniors.”

“NSA course registration started last week but I cannot join them - because I work 6 days. I want to be self-employed so I can do things that I like.”

“There was a job offer. The rate is quite okay \$10 per hour. But I couldn't commit because I already registered for a course already and that's why I cannot go for the job.”

- **Work commitments affect learning motivations and decision to take up learning**
- **Those looking for jobs were stressed out by future uncertainties and did not want to take the risk to enrol in courses**

# Caregiving responsibilities

- Limited time and energy makes it challenging for older caregivers to enrol in courses
- Notion of caregiving as duty, learning as optional

**“So when our kids have grown up...there’s finally chance to learn something. But now our chance to gain wisdom gets deprived. When my daughter goes back to work it’ll not be possible for me to learn. I said I cannot totally sacrifice my time, as I have already sacrificed 30 years to them, so I hope my time won’t be totally taken away from me.”**

**“Every day I work in Changi, then I have to bring my mother to the day care centre in Yishun. I don’t have much time so like these courses I attend ah I have to apply leave to attend.”**

# Courses did not appeal to participants' interest

“I am looking for more practical courses, more hands-on. The one I took 6 months ago is more on communication - it was not what I was looking for. **I want more practical courses like a nurse come to teach.**”

“There is nothing particularly interesting. **I am interested in a gardening course but can't find any courses on it.**”

“**I can't find any courses that interests me.** I'm interested in cooking classes but there isn't any that suits me.”

## Not all older adults want to learn for “learning’s sake”

Courses need to:

- Impart practical or applicable skills
  - E.g. solving problems, dealing with negative emotions
- Reflect current trends/ issues

# Course affordability

Having subsidies and cheaper courses are central to participants' decision to *begin or continue* learning



“After I stopped working I looked around for things to attend to enrich myself. **But it's not nice when you got no pay. Zero income. To learn, I got to take from my savings already.** How long can this last?”

“After I completed the course, they had another class. **I wanted to join, but they told me the subsidy is valid only once, and I had to pay a few hundred dollars. So I thought it's ok, I didn't have the money** and I didn't have the patience to ask from others.”

“**I don't think I will take more courses. I already use up all the funds already...**no point to take. Unless it's free one ah, need the top-up ah. So I can use (to) upgrade my Mandarin la. I will go back to class la.”



# What's the point of spending on courses if you are not able to use it?

“Even after learning so much about TCM...like my friends, who studied about how to treat themselves, how to observe the tongue. I feel that.. even though we know how to do pulse-reading... **we learned these at such an old age, even if we learn, it's of no use for us...** when you are sick, you still have to go and see the doctor”

“ITE has a very expensive course, about building your own blog, design your own blog—I don't know how to sell my products online. My daughter says “You know already”. I said I don't know! **Then she always says I waste money. It's true, because... I don't use it.**”

Participants feel that as they age, they find less monetary value in learning

- Limited opportunities to apply skills in everyday life
- Taking a course doesn't guarantee you are able to use the skills professionally (lack of job opportunities)

# Poor health

Poor health affects self-esteem and motivation when participants find it hard to do the things they had enjoyed doing

## Deteriorating physical health

- Poor eyesight, hearing impairment and posture issues make learning in the classroom uncomfortable
- Some participants had to miss classes because of existing health conditions
- In the quantitative study, “medical reasons” was one of the top reasons why older learners (26.7%) had to miss classes

## Depression; Mild cognitive impairment

- Affects mental well-being

“My mind is in a mess, cannot follow the lesson. I eat too much medicine so my memory has been bad I feel unhappy. I deteriorate by a lot, so.. really feel very sad.. why does everything deteriorate as you age? I was still doing so well last year...but my performance has been getting worse year by year, really. actually there are a lot of courses that I am interested to sign up for...It’s just that my health is not good, I really want to go for the other courses”

# Limited English proficiency or literacy

## Language Difficulties

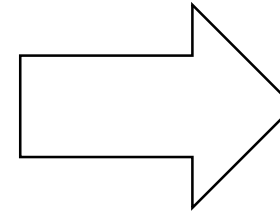
- Reduces participants' interest and confidence
- Sense of exclusion and self-degradation
- Hinders motivation and course satisfaction in the formal learning space

“Classes that were conducted in Chinese...very easy. But we are interested in those that are conducted in English. We realise we cannot keep up with the English standards. **I feel like we are just trapped in the middle, neither here nor there. You can't keep up with the environment. If you don't have the power of the language, you feel different from the rest.**”



# Negative attitudes towards ageing process

- Difficulty in retaining and processing information
- Loss of strength and flexibility
- Seeing oneself as “lazy” and “forgetful”



**Lack of confidence, self-esteem hinders motivation to learn**

“The keyboard is more difficult to learn...when I watch the TV programme people playing piano, I see them wah the finger very, very good. **We are oldies ah, our fingers not flexible**”

“In the past when you study about something you will go and check...Now when I’m studying hor... **if I don’t understand something, I will not pursue it further.** Even though the internet is very convenient...I am still very lazy, **one gets very lazy as they grow older lor.**”

“Now at this age even when you want to study ah is **you cannot remember everything memory not so good ah so might as well not study** after all you get another cert, so what if you get another cert.”

# Other factors

- Class cancellation due to low enrolment
- Popular courses get taken up very quickly
- Learning environment not comfortable
- Impatient instructors; lack of empathy for older people
- Not familiar with IT use in class
- No friends to take courses with
- Course location inaccessible
- Personal reasons
  - Lazy; not motivated; learning is not important

“They don’t have much substance and they contradict themselves. They put on airs, **they don’t respect the elderly. They think we are stupid.** We were given no instructions, they teach by the book and we were told to figure out ourselves. You don’t have to scream all the time. It makes us very frustrated.”

“The service provider rented a shop, and this space was **very badly lit you know?** The **air con was bad...it was very loud, and we couldn’t hear the instructor.** Everything was small and all black-black in a dark room, it’s hard to find anything.”

“Although they offer a lot of courses, the courses that you like, they get filled up very quickly. **You’re late by a step and it’s gone.**”

“The instructors didn’t use the blackboard you know. Most of the young people...they are able to use hand phone to Google. Some bring in their laptops, so they are able to make use of it. **I don’t have a laptop and not comfortable with it.**”

“The physical accessibility of the classroom is not suitable for seniors, **too much slope/ hill.** The block is **too far from main road.** Ideally, the class can be moved to external venues which are age-friendly”

# Recommendations

# Variety of payment models to cater to different types of older learners



- Affordable annual membership fee for unlimited course participation
- More free courses to enhance coping skills
- Attractive discounts for friends' sign-ups
- No course limits on NSA subsidies



# Inclusive programme design

- Continue asking older Singaporeans about what they want to learn and how
- More non-English courses
- Informal learning platforms



# Balancing work and caregiving



- Encourage companies to support lifelong learning
- Co-learning facilities for caregivers and care recipients

# Operational issues

- Targeted outreach
- Age-friendly learning spaces
  - Accessible and convenient
  - Comfortable
  - Inclusive use of IT
- Sensitivity-training for instructors
  - Teaching of older adults



# Thank You

Questions/ comments?

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