

# Research Progress on Mutual Empowerment between Universities and the Elderly Group from the Perspective of Active Aging

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## Abstract

Against the backdrop of global population aging, universities, as key players in knowledge innovation and social services, share a relationship of complementarity and synergy with the elderly group. However, current practices mostly adopt a "one-way service" model, lacking a systematic two-way mechanism. Based on the theories of human capital and social capital, this paper explores the theoretical basis, practical dilemmas, and implementation paths of mutual empowerment between universities and the elderly group. The study finds that the current practice of mutual empowerment faces issues such as resource imbalance, lack of mechanisms, and lagging social awareness. In response, this paper proposes a core path of "improving the quality of university elderly education - feedback from the elderly group - constructing a multi-stakeholder collaborative mechanism" and verifies its feasibility through the analysis of typical cases. The research can provide theoretical support and practical reference for the construction of an age-friendly society, and future studies need to deepen case comparisons and policy evaluations.

## Keywords

Active Aging; Mutual Empowerment; Universities; Elderly Group.

## 1. Introduction

China has entered an aging society and is facing the dual challenges of "aging before becoming wealthy" and "aging before being well-prepared". The concept of active aging emphasizes tapping into the potential value of the elderly group from three dimensions: "health, participation, and security". As a resource-gathering platform, universities currently mostly participate in addressing aging issues through a "one-way service" model (such as offering elderly universities), failing to fully activate the initiative and potential value of the elderly group. In fact, there is potential for "mutual empowerment" between the two parties: universities can provide educational and platform support to enhance the elderly's ability to participate in society; the elderly, as "silver-haired talents", can give back to universities' teaching, scientific research, and social services, thereby achieving resource sharing and value co-creation [1]. By sorting out relevant theoretical research and practices, this paper systematically explores the internal mechanism and path of mutual empowerment between universities and the elderly group, helping to transform the relationship from "one-way service" to "two-way win-win", and promoting the optimization and innovation of strategies to address aging.

## 2. Theoretical Basis and Literature Review

### 2.1. Core Concepts

Active aging is a comprehensive concept proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO). It emphasizes supporting the elderly to continuously participate in social, economic, and cultural affairs through comprehensive security measures, with the core of safeguarding their dignity and realizing their self-worth [2]. "Mutual empowerment" refers to a mutually beneficial and symbiotic relationship between universities and the elderly group: universities empower the elderly group through educational resources, platforms, and scientific research (such as curriculum development, social services, and social platforms); the elderly group gives back to universities with practical experience, life wisdom, and social capital (such as teaching assistance and student development support).

### 2.2. Theoretical Basis

The human capital theory points out that investment in health, education, and skills can enhance individual value. Within the framework of mutual empowerment, universities redevelop the human capital of the elderly through education, improving their knowledge, skills, and social adaptability. At the same time, the elderly' "tacit knowledge", practical experience, and social experience can also become valuable sources of human capital for universities, providing unique perspectives for talent cultivation and scientific research innovation [3].

The social capital theory emphasizes the impact of social networks, trust, and norms on collective actions. Universities provide platforms for the elderly to rebuild social relationships and promote their social integration; the social connections and community ties brought by the elderly to universities help expand the universities' social services and strengthen community cohesion. This two-way flow of social capital is conducive to building a closer cooperative relationship between universities and communities.

### 2.3. Literature Review

Foreign research shifted to a focus on rights protection and intergenerational integration at an earlier stage, moving away from a health-oriented perspective. For example, practical explorations like the "Intergenerational Learning Centers" in the United States and "Intergenerational Symbiotic Campuses" in Japan have effectively promoted social harmony and intergenerational integration.

Domestic research has attracted significantly more attention in recent years, but it mostly focuses on the models and curriculum settings of university elderly universities, showing a tendency of "valuing practice over theory and valuing supply over interaction". Wu Ruohan [4] and others have explored paths for elderly education to activate "silver-haired resources", but the analysis of two-way interaction mechanisms remains insufficient. Generally speaking, domestic research still lacks systematic studies on the mechanisms, effectiveness evaluation, and sustainable models of mutual empowerment [5~6].

## 3. Current Situation and Problems of Mutual Empowerment between Universities and the Elderly Group

### 3.1. Universities Empowering the Elderly Group: Positive Development Trend with Prominent Challenges

University elderly education in China has shown large-scale and diversified development. By 2025, more than 800 universities across the country have launched elderly education programs, with courses covering fields such as health, information technology, and culture, and the

education model has gradually moved towards the integration of offline and online learning. However, universities still face three major challenges in empowering the elderly group: first, uneven resource distribution, with high-quality resources concentrated in developed regions and top-tier universities, while local universities and rural areas lack resources; second, insufficient professionalism of teachers, as most universities rely on part-time teachers and volunteers who lack systematic training, leading to unstable teaching quality; third, lack of funding support mechanisms, relying on short-term grants or self-raised funds by universities, and this funding is insufficient to support curriculum development, teacher improvement, and facility upgrading, thus restricting sustainable development [7~8].

### **3.2. The Elderly Group Empowering Universities: Strong Willingness with Blocked Channels**

Surveys show that more than 70% of retired professionals are willing to participate in university teaching practice, research consultation, student guidance, etc., but there are obvious obstacles in the empowerment channels: first, institutional deficiencies, as universities lack formal recruitment mechanisms, incentive mechanisms, and safeguard measures; second, implicit age discrimination, where some teachers and students hold stereotypes about the elderly and ignore their value as "resources"; third, lack of effective organizational platforms, making it difficult to systematically integrate the experience and wisdom of the elderly and form a sustainable cooperation model [9].

### **3.3. Core Dilemma of Mutual Empowerment: Lack of Collaborative Mechanisms and Lagging Social Concepts**

The root cause of mutual empowerment problems lies in insufficient top-level design and constraints of social concepts. There is a lack of effective collaboration among multiple stakeholders such as the government, universities, communities, and enterprises, resulting in unsystematic policy planning, insufficient resource integration, and poor information flow. In addition, traditional concepts still regard the elderly as "dependents" and ignore their value as "contributors". This cognitive lag directly affects policy formulation and university management [10].

## **4. Exploration of Paths for Mutual Empowerment**

### **4.1. Systematic Construction of High-Quality Elderly Education**

In accordance with the physiological characteristics and learning habits of the elderly, an online education platform that is both functional and user-friendly should be built. In terms of content, high-quality curriculum resources of universities should be integrated to form thematic course modules such as "health management", "digital life", and "cultural inheritance", and improve the teaching chain of "theoretical explanation + practical demonstration + online Q&A". In addition, a three-dimensional teaching team consisting of "full-time + part-time + invited teachers" should be established to improve teaching quality. Promote the shift of courses from interest-oriented to competence-oriented, add practical courses such as "elderly care" and "community volunteer services", and explore a certification and social connection mechanism for learning achievements in collaboration with education authorities and industry associations. Some courses should be linked to professional qualifications to enhance the social value of elderly education [11].

### **4.2. Expanding Diversified Channels for the Elderly Group to Empower Universities**

Universities need to break age barriers and invite the elderly group to participate in teaching, scientific research, and cultural construction. Teaching Empowerment: Recruit retired

professionals as practical mentors, invite veteran cadres and senior scholars as course consultants, and launch "Silver-haired Lectures" to supplement classroom teaching content [12]. Scientific Research Empowerment: In relevant fields, treat the elderly as research partners rather than just research objects, invite them to participate in research design, data collection, and analysis, provide research suggestions from an "elderly perspective", and set up "silver-haired research positions" to support retired experts in guiding young teachers. Construction of Intergenerational Collaboration Platforms: Break intergenerational barriers through various activities, form "cross-generational friendship" book clubs, establish cross-age innovation and entrepreneurship teams, and carry out "pairing assistance" activities to form a positive interaction pattern of "the elderly guiding the young and the young helping the elderly". Strengthening University-Community Links: Give play to the elderly's advantages of "being familiar with communities and close to the people", making them "bridges" for universities to serve society. Organize the elderly group to participate in the compilation of university history, launch "traditional craftsmanship workshops", and join hands with university professional forces to participate in community services, realizing the accurate connection of "university resources - elderly organizations - community needs".

### **4.3. Constructing a "Government-University-Community-Enterprise" Collaborative Mechanism**

Mutual empowerment needs to break "information silos" and form a collaborative system involving the government, universities, communities, and enterprises [13~14]. The government should strengthen top-level design and provide policy and resource support: incorporate the mutual empowerment between universities and the elderly group into the local aging cause development plan, introduce supporting policies, design special funds for the construction of university elderly education facilities, and build an information sharing platform to promote resource connection between the two parties.

Universities should proactively open up resources: open infrastructure such as libraries, gymnasiums, and laboratories; establish a dedicated "Mutual Empowerment Management Center" responsible for project connection, elderly education, and teacher management; establish a "university-community co-construction" mechanism to extend elderly education classrooms to communities; cooperate with enterprises to develop aging-friendly products and courses, and realize a closed loop of "teaching - practice - transformation" [15].

Communities and enterprises should give play to their advantages in scenarios and resources: communities provide teaching locations and activity venues and assist in demand surveys; enterprises support platform construction through fund/equipment donations, carry out "silver-haired talent" training and provide employment or entrepreneurship support, and at the same time connect R&D needs with the experience feedback of the elderly group to form a positive cycle of "demand - R&D - feedback".

## **5. Case Analysis and Insights**

Tsinghua University, relying on its high-quality teaching staff and curriculum resources, provides systematic learning programs for the elderly in surrounding communities. It not only meets the learning needs of the elderly but also innovatively pairs elderly students with Tsinghua students. Student volunteers improve their communication and social practice abilities through assisting in teaching the elderly. Meanwhile, the elderly benefit from experiencing the vitality and respect of the younger generation. This realizes true mutual learning and intergenerational integration. Japan has built an "intergenerational symbiotic campus" model, where the elderly can participate in university courses and seminars together with college students, communicate with teachers and students, and express their opinions and views, giving full play to their own value. In addition, college students are given priority in

employment in elderly housing, and their salaries are paid in the form of scholarships to help them complete their studies.

The above cases show that strong policy support and in-depth institutional integration are the keys to the sustainable development of mutual empowerment. Furthermore, the mutual empowerment between universities and the elderly group requires positioning the elderly as "partners", designing scenarios and platforms for natural intergenerational interaction, and building a collaborative cooperation among multiple stakeholders with long-term and stable resource input.

## 6. Conclusions and Prospects

From the perspective of active aging, promoting the mutual empowerment between universities and the elderly group is a win-win strategy to address the challenges of population aging, develop elderly human resources, and promote higher education reform. Although current practices have achieved certain results, it is still necessary to solve dilemmas from the systematic and institutional levels. Through paths such as the high-quality development of elderly education, expanding the elderly group's empowerment of universities, and building a collaborative governance ecosystem, mutual empowerment can be promoted from a concept to large-scale and institutionalized development.

This study is mainly based on literature analysis and therefore lacks empirical data support. The depth of case analysis needs to be enhanced, and quantitative research and effectiveness evaluation are relatively weak. Future research can be deepened in the following directions: first, conduct in-depth case comparison studies to compare and analyze the mutual empowerment models and their effects in different regions and types of universities; second, strengthen quantitative research and effectiveness evaluation, build a scientific evaluation index system, and quantify the social and economic value of mutual empowerment; third, conduct follow-up studies on the impact of national and local policies (such as the "Regulations on Promoting Lifelong Education") on mutual empowerment practices to provide empirical basis for policy optimization. Through continuous and in-depth research, more solid theoretical support and practical guidance will be provided for the construction of an age-friendly society.

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