

Innovative Development and Optimization Path of Elderly Education in Wenzhou under the Background of a Learning Society

Yao Cheng

Wenzhou Polytechnic, Wenzhou 325000, China

Abstract

With China's rapidly aging population, elderly education has become crucial, especially in the context of building a lifelong learning society. This paper critiques the welfare-based model of elderly education and proposes a shift to empower older adults as active lifelong learners. Focusing on Wenzhou, the paper explores the city's innovative efforts in elderly education and addresses challenges in integrating it with other sectors. By proposing strategies for conceptual innovation, activating the subjectivity of older adults, strengthening the leadership role of higher education institutions, and removing educational barriers, the paper offers a pathway to transform elderly education into a dynamic component of the lifelong learning system. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on elderly education, social participation, and sustainable development.

Keywords

Elderly Education; Learning Society; Lifelong Learning; Wenzhou; Educational Integration.

1. Introduction

Contemporary Chinese society is undergoing a profound demographic shift marked by accelerated aging. According to the Seventh National Population Census, individuals aged 60 and above have reached 264 million, accounting for 18.7% of the total population. Simultaneously, the goal of building a learning society grounded in lifelong learning for all has been incorporated into the country's medium- and long-term development strategies, becoming a key national priority. Within this dual context, responding to the physical and mental needs of older adults through expanded elderly education is vital. It not only addresses the challenges of demographic aging but also lays the groundwork for a lifelong learning system that benefits all citizens.

Wenzhou, an economically developed coastal city in eastern China, faces an aging rate higher than the national average. In light of the nationwide push to build a learning society and Wenzhou's strategic goal of becoming an elderly-friendly city, a pressing question emerges: how can its elderly education system break through existing limitations, align with broader historical and urban development trajectories, and achieve innovative, integrated growth?

2. Reinterpreting Elderly Education within the Framework of a Learning Society

A learning society is a social model centered on the learner, supported by a robust lifelong education and service system, and grounded in the widespread development of learning-oriented organizations. At its core, it seeks to guarantee and stimulate the lifelong learning rights and needs of all members of society. Through continuous knowledge renewal and skills

enhancement, it empowers individual growth while promoting sustainable social progress. It is an open, inclusive, innovation-driven, and dynamic whole.

Elderly education aims to enhance the moral, cultural, and intellectual quality of seniors, along with their physical and mental health. It seeks to meet their needs for knowledge acquisition, life enrichment, health promotion, and social contribution. Over time, its theoretical framework has evolved from a focus on “welfare care” and “recreational well-being” to emphasizing “social participation” and “value creation.” Compared with international practice, China’s elderly education has traditionally emphasized leisure and well-being, and focused more on improving social adaptability than enabling active engagement in community life^[1]. In contrast, the Social Participation Theory developed in international elderly education research offers more relevant insights today. This theory argues that people at all ages have a need to engage in social or community activities, interact with others, and construct a positive self-image, thereby attaining emotional fulfillment^[2]. It has been widely applied in the field of elderly education, driving innovation. Training programs on senior leadership, older adult human resource development, and elder volunteer service have been integrated into international curricula. These initiatives help enhance seniors’ capacity for participation while supporting their mental and physical well-being^[3].

Influenced by traditional cultural norms, older adults in China have historically been regarded as a group requiring additional social support, while elderly education has often been framed primarily as a public welfare endeavor. However, under the framework of a learning society, there is a growing need to shift this paradigm. Elderly education should emphasize the subjectivity and agency of older adults, recognizing them not merely as recipients of care but as active agents in their own lifelong development. It is essential to consider how their participation in the lifelong learning system can be expanded and how elderly education can be more organically connected with other educational sectors.

From this perspective, elderly education must no longer exist in isolation but serve as a crucial link within the broader architecture of lifelong learning and learning society construction. Its mission goes beyond meeting the diverse and personalized learning needs of seniors—it should also empower them to become contributors to the learning society. This includes unlocking their potential in cultural transmission, experience-sharing, and community service. Reframing elderly education in this way requires innovation, cross-sector integration, and intergenerational engagement. Ultimately, such an approach can catalyze the learning motivation of all citizens and drive sustainable social progress.

3. The Current Situation and Challenges of Elderly Education in Wenzhou

3.1. Development Overview

Wenzhou began developing elderly education relatively early and has established a solid foundation. The city has built a four-tier educational network comprising municipal elderly universities, county- or district-level elderly universities, township or subdistrict elderly schools, and village or community-level learning sites. This structure forms a comprehensive model that integrates central campuses, grassroots institutions, and digital platforms^[4]. As of 2024, Wenzhou has established 1,412 physical teaching sites for elderly education, supported by 4,129 instructors and serving approximately 157,600 elderly learners. The city has actively worked to create an efficient and accessible “15-minute elderly learning circle” to promote equitable educational access for seniors.

3.2. Innovative Measures

Wenzhou has undertaken effective explorations to expand the supply channels of elderly education and has accumulated valuable experience in the process.

3.2.1. Curriculum Design Reflecting Local Characteristics

Wenzhou's elderly universities offer a wide range of courses that balance diversity with relevance. Traditional subjects such as painting, calligraphy, vocal music, dance, instrumental performance, and health preservation are widely available. Alongside this, the curriculum includes contemporary topics tailored to seniors' daily needs, such as smartphone literacy and mental health. Emphasizing the integration of local cultural elements, Wenzhou draws on its rich traditional heritage, intangible cultural assets, and region-specific educational resources to develop unique offerings such as Yueqing Fine-line Paper Cutting (*a form of intricate folk carving art*) and Ruian Drum Ballad (*a traditional narrative singing form accompanied by percussion*). These locally grounded courses significantly enrich the spiritual and cultural lives of elderly learners.

3.2.2. Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration in Education Delivery

Wenzhou has actively explored models of collaborative education involving diverse stakeholders. Through mechanisms such as government service procurement and project-based partnerships, the city has encouraged broad participation from social organizations, thereby expanding the supply and strengthening the capacity of elderly education. A representative example is the "Third Age College" initiated by the *Wenzhou Evening News*, which integrates various resources to offer nearly 30 courses each semester and serves close to 1,000 elderly learners.

3.2.3. Integration with Related Industries

Wenzhou actively promotes the integration of elderly education with other industrial sectors by consolidating resources from fields such as healthcare for the elderly and cultural wellness. It explores a comprehensive "medical-nursing-education" model. For example, the "Yixin Kangyang Elderly Learning Center" in Gaolou Town, Ruian, has developed an integrated approach that combines medical care, elder services, rehabilitation, and education, aiming to improve the physical and mental well-being of older adults and meet the diverse needs of the elderly population.

3.2.4. Digital Development to Bridge the "Silver Generation Divide"

In recent years, Wenzhou has advanced the digital transformation of elderly education by building a smart learning network that spans both urban and rural areas. It has integrated resources from provincial and municipal lifelong learning platforms and launched the "Wenxuetong" online education portal. Partnering with platforms such as Hualing College, it also offers remote learning courses for seniors. Additionally, through initiatives like community-based "Silver Digital Stations" and home learning circles, the city helps older adults overcome the digital divide and fosters a blended ecosystem of online-offline elderly education.

3.3. Existing Challenges

3.3.1. Lack of Subjective Agency among Older Adults

Elderly education in Wenzhou has been developing for many years, with increasingly enriched courses and more diverse formats, and older adults show high enthusiasm for participation. However, when examined within the framework of the lifelong learning system and learning society, the role of the elderly group still largely remains that of passive learners, with their subjectivity yet to be fully activated. Older adults possess rich life experience, professional skills, and local cultural knowledge, but these resources have not been systematically explored or transformed into usable educational resources for the teaching process. In terms of curriculum design and teaching management, there are also a lack of institutionalized channels to incorporate the opinions and needs of elderly learners, neglecting their potential as active contributors. This lack of subjectivity not only results in a mismatch between educational supply and deeper needs but also leads to the underutilization of the valuable experiences and

social value of the elderly, thereby weakening elderly education's role in empowering individuals, revitalizing resources, and serving society.

3.3.2. Weak Integration with Other Educational Systems

At present, Wenzhou's exploration of elderly education—whether through cross-industry integration models or digital development strategies—is still primarily focused on external collaboration between elderly education and other social sectors. From the perspective of a learning society's overall structure, elderly education in Wenzhou remains somewhat disconnected from other types of education, such as basic education, vocational education, higher education, and community education. There is a lack of institutionalized linkage mechanisms, such as mutual credit recognition, curriculum integration, shared resource platforms, and joint projects. As a result, resources remain fragmented, and it is difficult to achieve complementary strengths. The inability to establish effective connections with other education systems limits the integration of elderly education into the lifelong learning framework, thereby restricting its further development. This also hinders elderly education's potential to play a bridging role within the structure of a learning society.

3.3.3. Insufficient Involvement of Higher Education Institutions

In recent years, some universities in Wenzhou have gradually begun to participate in elderly education, helping to enrich the spiritual and cultural lives of older adults. However, due to the lack of stable, dedicated funding, rigid internal systems, and a shortage of full-time teaching staff, most university-led elderly education initiatives remain in the realm of charitable or public-interest activities. These programs tend to have unclear objectives, limited scale, underdeveloped structures, and insufficient academic depth in their curricula. No influential elderly education brand has yet emerged, and integration with the broader elderly education system in Wenzhou is still weak. Compared to universities' deep involvement in local higher education, vocational education, and continuing education, their participation in elderly education remains limited. Although universities have high-quality teaching resources, facilities, and capacity for knowledge innovation, elderly education in Wenzhou is still primarily led by elderly universities and community organizations. The academic leadership, resource-sharing, and curriculum development roles that universities should fulfill remain ambiguous, and overall coordination is relatively weak.

4. Practical Strategies for Advancing Elderly Education in Wenzhou

To achieve innovative upgrading of elderly education in Wenzhou, coordinated efforts must be made across several dimensions, including conceptual reform, activation of subjectivity, strengthening the role of higher education institutions, and removing educational barriers.

4.1. Conceptual Innovation as the Fundamental Premise

In order to realize deep transformation in elderly education, the entire city must first foster an awareness of lifelong learning and a culture of active aging. "Elderly education is not only lifelong education directed at the elderly themselves, but should also serve as aging-related education for all generations and social groups"^[5]. The concepts of "lifelong learning for all" and "learning throughout life" should be integrated into school classrooms at all levels as well as public discourse. General education courses related to aging society should be offered in universities and open university systems to help younger generations understand, respect, and actively engage in aging-related services.

To further promote the construction of a learning society, it is also necessary to reshape society's perception of the elderly. This should be achieved through media, community activities, and classroom education to create a strong public communication atmosphere. Such efforts should inform both older adults and the general public about the significance of social

participation in enhancing the quality of later life and realizing self-worth, and encourage older adults to actively integrate into society and contribute value.

4.2. Empowering Subjectivity as a Key Step

The development of elderly education must not limit older adults to the role of passive learners; rather, it should fully empower them to become co-constructors and contributors to education. Efforts should be made to fully tap into the potential of the “silver human resources” by systematically advancing the development of a “senior educator pool” and a “senior talent pool.” Elderly individuals with professional expertise, rich experience, or management capabilities should be encouraged and supported to take on roles as lecturers, course advisors, teaching managers, or curriculum developers. This approach not only helps to alleviate the potential shortage of educational human resources in the future, but also ensures that the wisdom and experience of the elderly become active elements in the educational process.

Drawing from the experience of Guangzhou, a “Silver Wisdom Think Tank” could be established to actively engage silver-aged talents in advising governments and enterprises, and to provide strategic consultation for regional economic development^[6]. Meanwhile, platforms for intergenerational learning and cultural transmission should be built. Leveraging Wenzhou’s distinctive Ou-Yue culture, along with its abundant intangible cultural heritage and red resources, projects can be designed in the form of co-learning and elder-teaching-young models. These include programs on heritage craft instruction, local history narration, and red-themed study tours. Such initiatives can explore mechanisms for deep interaction between the elderly and youth, turning elderly education into a vital link for cultural continuity and intergenerational integration. For example, the Gulou Subdistrict in Echeng District, Ezhou City, Hubei Province, organized a “Red Leaders and Silver Elders Hand in Hand: Reliving Red Memories” activity, which brought together seniors and children in a themed event on red education. Through cultural inheritance and red-themed study programs, elderly and young participants are encouraged to jointly understand historical and cultural heritage, allowing intergenerational integration to emerge within a broader social and historical context^[7].

4.3. University Leadership as Essential Support

Higher education institutions should actively fulfill their social service function, leveraging their strengths in talent, technology, and knowledge to participate more proactively in elderly education and the construction of learning-oriented cities.

First, they should promote full resource sharing by opening campus libraries, laboratories, sports facilities, and online courses to elderly learners in an orderly and structured manner.

Second, they should explore effective pathways for aligning elderly education with higher education curricula. For example, a “senior auditing” system can be established^[8], allowing elderly learners to select certain undergraduate or continuing education courses. Universities can also offer high-quality general education lectures and specialized workshops for older adults, helping to develop recognizable elderly education brands. In addition, students can be paired with senior learners to participate in projects such as oral history recording and intergenerational learning. Institutions can also rely on their disciplinary advantages to provide services such as reemployment skills training and entrepreneurship guidance for elderly individuals in need.

Third, they should actively develop a qualified teaching force. A faculty pool for elderly education should be established, making use of universities’ educational capacities by channeling existing faculty resources into elderly education. Meanwhile, outstanding elderly individuals should be trained or recruited as instructors to continue contributing in the field of education.

Fourth, universities should strengthen their research function in elderly education by supporting the establishment of research centers focused on this field. These centers should engage in curriculum development, theoretical research, and quality assessment.

4.4. Removing Structural Barriers to Enable Integration

To overcome the fragmentation between elderly education and other types of education—such as basic education, vocational education, higher education, and community education—it is necessary to explore the establishment of mechanisms for articulating learning outcomes and to build “interchange bridges” connecting elderly education with other educational pathways. As one proposal states: “A system and standards for credit recognition should be established, with pilot programs for mutual credit recognition carried out, to achieve horizontal articulation between elderly education and degree training or continuing education, as well as vertical linkages among elderly education programs at different levels”^[9].

Meanwhile, platforms for resource sharing should be actively built, integrating curriculum resources and faculty strengths from schools of all levels and types, in order to facilitate the efficient circulation of resources within the framework of a learning society.

Most importantly, efforts should be made to ensure the practical implementation of integration projects. For example, elderly groups can serve as bridges between generations, as in joint programs where vocational colleges and secondary technical schools collaborate with retired high-skilled professionals to establish skill-transmission workshops. These “intergenerational co-learning” demonstration projects can, through continuous practice, truly realize complementarity and coordinated development among different types of education.

4.5. Enhancing Institutional Support as a Solid Foundation

Sustainable development depends on a sound support system. Economic support is a key driving force behind the development of elderly education. It is essential to further improve the diversified funding mechanism: government finances should continue to support institutions such as vocational colleges, increase investment in dedicated funds for elderly education, and explore the establishment of an elderly education development fund to attract donations from enterprises, social organizations, and individuals.

It is also necessary to strengthen standards-based guidance and quality assurance. This includes formulating and promoting quality standards and specifications for elderly education covering curriculum design, teaching processes, and service management. A scientific monitoring and evaluation system should be established. Third-party professional institutions should be introduced to conduct independent evaluations, and emphasis should be placed on assessing the effectiveness of both elderly education programs and cross-sector integrated educational projects to ensure service quality and integration outcomes. A mechanism should also be built to feed back and apply evaluation results, promoting continuous improvement.

Last but not least, efforts should be made to strengthen the development of a professional teaching and administrative workforce. A sound system should be established for the recruitment, training, and advancement of full-time and part-time elderly education instructors. Specialized training and certification should be provided in areas such as gerontology, age-appropriate pedagogy, intergenerational teaching strategies, and communication skills. The establishment of a “silver faculty pool” should be explored to encourage retired professionals with expertise to participate in teaching. Incentive mechanisms including remuneration, subsidies, and honorary recognition should be improved to enhance the stability and professionalism of the teaching team. At the same time, management personnel should receive training to improve their abilities in resource coordination and project operation.

In the context of building a learning society and facing the challenges of a deeply aging population, elderly education must undergo internal transformation and high-quality

development to contribute new momentum to the lifelong learning system. This presents a critical opportunity. Drawing on solid practical foundations and a spirit of innovation, Wenzhou has made valuable explorations in models such as “school-community integration” and “education-care integration.” Yet the full integration of elderly education into the learning society remains a challenge. Going forward, Wenzhou should uphold its pioneering spirit, mobilize support from all sectors, revitalize diverse resources, and fully unleash the potential of older adults. Through bold experimentation and focused practice, it can promote genuine integration of elderly education and learning society, and offer a “Wenzhou model” for building an age-friendly city and advancing lifelong learning both nationally and globally.

Acknowledgments

Funding: This work was supported by the 2024 Wenzhou Polytechnic University-Level Research Project on “Research and Exploration of Innovative Development Paths for Elderly Education in Wenzhou under the Background of a Learning Society” (Project No. WZY2024041).

References

- [1] Liu, X. (2024). Comparison and Inspiration of the Development Status of Elderly Education between China and Foreign Countries. *Journal of Jiangxi Open University*, 26(1), 15-22. <https://doi.org/10.13844/j.cnki.jxddxb.2024.01.008>.
- [2] Yu, Z. (2016). A comparative study of elderly education between China and Foreign Countries. *China Adult Education*, 3, 19-22.
- [3] Liu, X. (2024). Comparison and Inspiration of the Development Status of Elderly Education between China and Foreign Countries. *Journal of Jiangxi Open University*, 26(1), 15-22. <https://doi.org/10.13844/j.cnki.jxddxb.2024.01.008>.
- [4] Zhu, S., & Chen, Q. (2018). The Status Quo and Future Supply of Elderly Education-A Case Study of Wenzhou. *Adult Education*, 38(12), 50-54.
- [5] Jiang, Y. (2024). Reform of Elderly Education for a Learning Society: Historical Tracing, Local Rooting and Future Turning. *Education and Vocation*, 7, 5-12. <https://doi.org/10.13615/j.cnki.1004-3985.2024.07.003>.
- [6] Guangming Net. (2024, December 19). "Lao you suo xue, rang yin ling sheng huo you le you wei" — A survey on the current development status of elderly education in China. *Guangming Daily*. https://news.gmw.cn/2024-12/19/content_37745820.htm
- [7] Deng, L., Yang, Y., & Wu, Z. (2024). Interactive pathways for building a high-quality education system under the perspective of active aging: An analysis based on the interaction between youth education and three types of elderly education. *Education Science Forum*, 17, 29-33.
- [8] Xu, H. (2024). The Value, Experience and Path of Promoting Education for the Elderly in the Context of Active Aging. *Lifelong Education Research*, 35(1), 66-71. <https://doi.org/10.13425/j.cnki.jjou.2024.01.009>.
- [9] Jiang, Y. (2024). Reform of Elderly Education for a Learning Society: Historical Tracing, Local Rooting and Future Turning. *Education and Vocation*, 7, 5-12. <https://doi.org/10.13615/j.cnki.1004-3985.2024.07.003>.