

Gaps and Challenges in Gerontology Education and Employment in Singapore

AG6900 Gerontology Practicum

by

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1. Introduction

Philosophical and literary reflections on what it means to grow old appear in the earliest historical records, but the systematic study of ageing began about a century ago and is a relatively new field of study. In recent decades, the rapid ageing of populations in developed countries has increased academic interest in the subject. As a result, the study of ageing has been integrated into many disciplines. While each discipline has key conceptual and empirical generalisations about ageing, there is little agreement across disciplines about the core of knowledge in gerontology (*Ferraro, 2017*).

Gerontology, as an academic field, equips professionals with the necessary theoretical knowledge and practical skills to tackle the multifaceted challenges of an increasingly diverse ageing population. The study revealed that individuals' commitment to a career in gerontology was influenced significantly by their motivation to work with older adults, job satisfaction, and the extent of formal education received in gerontology (Gendron et al., 2014).

There is no doubt that Singapore needs a workforce that understands and can meet the diverse needs of older people. Those working in the ageing field found jobs through referrals from friends/colleagues or job search websites. No jobs match the keyword "Gerontologist" on the Singapore job search website MyCareersFuture (MyCareersFuture, n.d.). Jobs related to the ageing field require applicants to have some knowledge, skills, training, or prior experience related to ageing but do not specifically recruit graduates with a background in gerontology.

Gerontology education students entering the job market cannot differentiate between other jobs requiring a clear disciplinary background and may feel uncertain about career opportunities (Guest et al., 2019). Gerontology-educated job seekers may look for other positions rather than in the ageing field. It may also lead students interested in gerontology to change their major to other professions that clearly require their specialist skills or knowledge for career prospects. Along with the challenge of graduates needing help finding jobs, recruitment companies have also fed back that recruiting people without gerontology training to provide services and quality of care may not meet clients' expectations. Overall, the field of gerontological education and employment suffers from a lack of appreciation and core skills in education and practical training. Addressing these issues is essential to ensure the development of the next generation of gerontological professionals (*Dupre & Gu, 2021*).

In a previous survey for the Practicum project, 34 graduates of the gerontology programme expressed different views on the usefulness of attending a gerontology education for employment in the ageing field.

- Respondents already working in the ageing field (n=13) continued to work in the same job after graduating from the gerontology course, with no challenges in finding a job but no career advancement.
- Mid-career switcher Respondents who successfully found employment in the field of ageing (n=14) encountered some challenges in their job search.
 - Employers or HR departments needed to be made aware of the gerontology courses available, and respondents felt there were no specific job listings.

- The network of contacts built up from previous jobs could not be used in gerontology as it needed to be more relevant, limiting job opportunities for graduates.
 - Gerontology appears to be an additional requirement on top of professional requirements such as medical and nursing and cannot stand alone.
 - The salary offered does not match the qualifications of the graduates.
 - For respondents who are senior employees with no experience working in the field of gerontology prior to their studies, finding a job in gerontology can be challenging as employers prefer people with a particular relevant background.
- Respondents who were not currently working in the field of ageing and had tried to find work in the field of ageing after graduation (n=7) also experienced the challenges mentioned earlier. In addition, for fresh graduates, respondents with relevant backgrounds and work experience as healthcare workers or social workers found it difficult to enter the ageing field. Employers needed to be more confident in accepting a candidate with no relevant background who had only taken gerontology courses. Respondents chose to work in something other than the field of ageing after graduation because the salary offered did not match their qualifications or expectations.

This report elaborated on challenges in the current Gerontological education and employment opportunities landscapes in Singapore. Specifically, the following questions are answers:

1. Why do we need specialised Gerontology education programs instead of including ageing-related courses as part of social science or nursing programs?

2. Who is the target audience for Gerontology education programs, as perceived by educators?
3. What are the current challenges faced by Gerontology education programs?
4. What are the gaps in employment status and career progression for Gerontology graduates based on feedback from graduates?
5. Should Gerontology be included in general education curricula?

2. Practicum Project Overview

The Gerontological Society of Singapore (GSS) organised a virtual roundtable, inviting experts in the field of Gerontology from educational institutions and industry stakeholders. Total seven distinguished panellists participated in the virtual roundtable scheduled on 10th May, 2023.

The virtual roundtable discussion used a focus group approach with remote, semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. The discussion was structured around five questions about gaps and challenges in gerontology education and employment. In the 80-minute recording of the virtual roundtable discussion, the key points raised by each panellist were transcribed directly and organised chronologically according to the order of the questions asked.

The topic generated significant interest among individuals involved in the field of ageing. The promotional eFlyer sent out for the event resulted in 84 registrations, and on the day of the webinar, 59 participants joined the session with the panellists. Post the event, an email was sent

to each registered attendee, encouraging them to subscribe to updates from the GSS and expressing the importance of gerontology as a professional training field, as well as gerontological education and employment. So far, 17 individuals have responded positively and expressed their interest in subscribing to the updates.

3. Methodology

After COVID-19, people have become accustomed to the web conference format and are proficient in using video conferencing software. Considering that the preparation time for the physical event was very tight, a virtual roundtable was used as the webinar to have discussion on “Gaps and Challenges in Gerontology Education and Employment” in Singapore.

The flexibility of the virtual roundtable in terms of scheduling ensured a higher attendance rate. The meetings took place between weekday lunch breaks, and panellists could attend the event at their workplaces without conflicting with their other commitments. This flexibility ensured higher attendance from the audience. The interactive features of the virtual platform enriched the roundtable experience. Panellists could share resources, answer questions from the audience, and interact with the audience to create a dynamic learning environment. For the organisers, the virtual roundtable was digitally recorded and archived for future reference. It allowed researchers who could not attend to catch up on valuable insights shared during the event and re-access the recordings for future research.

A snowball approach was used to identify panellists for the virtual roundtable. First, based on the school's resources and information from previous practicum reports- several key panellists whose expertise and knowledge were highly respected and recognised in gerontology education were identified. After confirming participation and setting meeting times with the initial panellist group members, they were asked to recommend other experts with relevant expertise suitable for roundtable panellists. Next, the recommended panellists were contacted and explained the purpose and details of the virtual roundtable. Once they agreed to participation, they were asked to recommend other suitable potential roundtable panellists. This process was repeated to keep expanding the pool of potential panellists until we had enough of them for the roundtable.

After identifying suitable panellists, a formal invitation was sent to them to participate in the virtual roundtable, and they were given sufficient time to consider the invitation and respond accordingly. The formal invitation communicated the purpose, date, format, and expectations for their participation. The whole invitation process considered the panellists' background, experience, and alignment with the topic and objectives, selecting panellists who could bring different perspectives and knowledge to the discussion.

The Chatham House Rule (*The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2023*) is followed to keep speakers and participants anonymous and share information without disclosing the identity of the sources. Based on the virtual roundtable discussions on "Gaps and Challenges in Gerontology Education and Employment" in Singapore, the main points are summarised in the next section.

4. Discussion

As the proportion of older people (aged 60 years and above) is rapidly growing in Singapore, we need specialist courses that provide in-depth knowledge and skills, specialising in ageing issues, including psychological, social, and biological aspects. This specialised focus enables students to develop a comprehensive understanding of the ageing process and related issues, enabling them to address the unique challenges older people face. The growing ageing population will increase the demand for elderly-oriented services. It will increase the demands for gerontology professionals as they have a good understanding of the different aspects of ageing, and hence they can provide better services to the elderly. The specialised Gerontology education programs are distinct from other disciplines like social science or nursing as it encompasses a multidisciplinary approach that goes beyond the scope of these related fields.

The target audience for these Gerontology education programs includes individuals from various backgrounds. It includes students who have a genuine interest in ageing and want to pursue a career in the Gerontology field, as well as professionals from other fields who seek to transition into the ageing sector or incorporate gerontological knowledge into their current work. Since gerontology education aims to bridge disciplinary and cultural perspectives to generate new ideas and approaches for understanding the needs of the global ageing population, it encourages collaboration among health practitioners, designers, architects, and cultural practitioners to address challenges associated with ageing in multicultural societies. Therefore, professionals, academics, and policymakers involved in cross-cultural design, health, and ageing are also part of the target audience for Gerontology education programs. (*Hills et al., 2021*).

However, there are several challenges faced by Gerontology education programs in Singapore. These challenges include limited awareness and understanding of Gerontology as a field of study, a lack of core skills curriculum across institutions, and a lack of qualified and experienced faculty members to teach Gerontology courses, making it difficult to ensure consistent quality and content in Gerontology education. Since young people have very little exposure to and knowledge of ageing groups, making it difficult to develop understanding and passion (Robert & Mosher-Ashley, 2000). Further, the negative stereotypes associated with ageing make it difficult for the field of gerontology to attract young people (Hernandez & González, 2008).

The main challenge Gerontology graduates and practitioners face is the lack of professional accreditation and recognition by the healthcare and social care sectors. This makes it difficult for gerontology graduates to find work and advance their careers, which further reduces the willingness of people to join a gerontology program. Further, the hiring criteria for operations in the hospital and healthcare require hands-on experience, which reduces employment options for people with other backgrounds.

The basic knowledge of Gerontology should be incorporated into general education to promote age-friendly attitudes and enhance intergenerational understanding (Msw, 2003). While general education could provide an overview of ageing-related issues, specialised Gerontology programs are necessary to develop in-depth expertise in the field. Further, Gerontology-related topics could be introduced as electives or enrichment modules to cater to wider audiences.

5. Recommendations

Due to the changing demographic of Singapore, the importance of gerontology education and demands for gerontology professionals will be increasing in the near future. Therefore, efforts should be made to increase awareness and understanding of the benefits of Gerontology as a field of study. It can be achieved through targeted marketing campaigns, informational seminars, and outreach programs to schools and communities. Further, the collaboration between educational institutions, professional associations, and government agencies can promote the value and importance of Gerontology education.

While specialised Gerontology education programs are essential, there is merit of basic Gerontology knowledge in general education curricula. It can promote age-friendly attitudes and enhance intergenerational understanding. Gerontology-related topics can be included as elective courses or enrichment modules to cater to a wider audience. Given the evolving nature of ageing-related issues, educational institutions should provide opportunities for graduates and professionals to engage in continuous professional development through workshops, conferences, and online courses. This will ensure that practitioners stay updated with the latest research, best practices, and technological advancements in the field (Hughes & Heycox, 2005).

To ensure consistent quality and content in Gerontology education, there is a need to establish standardised curriculum guidelines across educational institutions. This can be achieved through collaborative efforts between academia, industry experts, and regulatory bodies to improve the recognition of Gerontology by the healthcare and social care sectors. Regular curriculum reviews

and updates should be conducted to incorporate emerging research and best practices in the field. Gerontology education should encourage interdisciplinary collaboration among students and professionals from various fields, which can be achieved by interdisciplinary projects, joint seminars, and shared resources. By fostering such collaboration, students can gain a broader perspective on ageing issues and develop holistic solutions.

Gerontology education programs should integrate career development components that guide career progression. This can include mentorship programs, professional development workshops, and networking opportunities. Collaboration with professional associations and industry experts can help define career pathways and establish professional certification programs in Gerontology. Collaboration between educational institutions and industry stakeholders is crucial in creating more job opportunities for Gerontology graduates. Industry partners can provide internships, practicum placements, and job shadowing programs to facilitate the transition from education to employment. Having networks and partnerships with healthcare organisations, social service agencies, and aged care facilities can help match graduates with relevant job openings in the field of healthcare, social services, and education. Also, allowing gerontologists to act as consultants, they can combine their knowledge of ageing with expertise in their general work. This is especially true for mid-life converts with extensive experience in other fields.

By implementing these recommendations, Gerontology education in Singapore can address the identified gaps and challenges and better prepare graduates to meet the demands of the ageing society of Singapore. It will contribute to the development of a skilled and competent workforce that can effectively address the needs of older adults and promote healthy and active ageing.

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Appendix

1. Panellists of Gaps and Challenges in Gerontological Education and Employment

Roundtable, 10 May 2023.

Meet The Panellists



Carol Ma
Singapore University of
Social Sciences

Head of Gerontology Programmes,
Senior Fellow (Service-Learning &
Community Engagement),
S R Nathan School of Human
Development



Emily Wong
Temasek Polytechnic

Course Chair,
Diploma in Social Sciences in Gerontology,
School of Humanities and Social Sciences



Helen Ko
Singapore University of
Social Sciences

Associate Professor, Master and PhD of
Gerontology Programmes,
S R Nathan School of Human Development



Janice Chia
Singapore Ageing Asia Pte
Ltd

Founder & Managing Director

Meet The Panellists



Kalyani Kirtikar Mehta
Singapore University of
Social Sciences

Former Professor of Master and
Ph.D. of Gerontology Programmes



Kevin Tan
Singapore University of
Social Sciences

Head of Programme,
Minor in Applied Ageing Studies,
Senior Lecturer, Master/PhD in
Gerontology and Innovation



Premchand Varma Dommaraju
Nanyang Technological
University, Singapore

Associate Professor,
School of Social Sciences,
Director of the MSo in Applied
Gerontology programme



Shannon Ang
Nanyang Technological
University, Singapore

Assistant Professor,
School of Social Sciences

2. E-flyer Page 1: Virtual Roundtable Information and Registration Page



GERONTOLOGICAL SOCIETY

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Organised by the Gerontological Society of Singapore

GAPS AND CHALLENGES IN GERONTOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

DATE; MAY 10, 2023

TIME; 1:00-2:30 PM

ZOOM ONLINE MEETING

This roundtable will explore the needs, challenges, and opportunities of gerontological education in Singapore. It aims to establish a dialogue across Gerontology Programmes stakeholders from different institutions in Singapore.

Audiences:

- *Gerontological Society of Singapore Members*
- *Students from different institutions in Singapore*

Please scan the QR code below to register or [click here](#).



If you need further details, please contact Ms. Chen Chen at cchen033@e.ntu.edu.sg.

2. E-flyer Page 2: Event Details



GERONTOLOGICAL SOCIETY

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Organised by the Gerontological Society of Singapore

GAPS AND CHALLENGES IN GERONTOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

EVENT DETAILS

Host-cum Moderator	Dr Wayne Freeman Chong Council Member, Gerontological Society Non-Executive Director, GeroPsych Consultants Pte Ltd Ms Chen Chen Master of Science Student, Applied Gerontology Nanyang Technological University
Roundtable	10 May 2023 1:00 PM - 2:30 PM (Zoom meeting will be open at 12:50 PM)
Venue	Zoom (Virtual meeting) The meeting link will be shared upon registration. Please note that attendance is by invitation only.
Panellists	Approximately 6-8 faculty members who specialize in Gerontology Programmes from various institutions and industry stakeholders in Singapore.
Audiences	Gerontological Society of Singapore Members Students from different institutions in Singapore
Output	Reports based on the roundtable will be written, following the Chatham House Rule.



If you need further details, please contact Ms. Chen Chen at cchen033@e.ntu.edu.sg.

2. E-flyer Page 3: Roundtable Synopsis



GERONTOLOGICAL SOCIETY

ROUNDTABLE SYNOPSIS

Singapore's ageing population has increased the demand for professionals with expertise in gerontology. In response, educational institutions have developed gerontology education programs that provide comprehensive knowledge of the ageing process and its impact. Some programs are specialised, focusing on specific aspects of ageing, such as nursing, health, and care work, while others offer a more general multidisciplinary perspective. Despite the demand for gerontology graduates, they face challenges in career progression due to a lack of employer awareness regarding the value of their expertise. In this context, the roundtable discussion will focus on the following questions:

- Why do we need specialised gerontology education programs instead of including ageing-related courses as part of social science or nursing programs?
- Who is the target audience for gerontology education programs, as perceived by educators?
- What are the current challenges faced by gerontology education programs?
- What are the gaps in employment status and career progression for gerontology graduates based on feedback from graduates?
- Should Gerontology be included in general education curricula?

Output: Reports based on the roundtable will be written, following the Chatham House Rule.



If you need further details, please contact Ms. Chen Chen at cchen033@e.ntu.edu.sg.

Key notes of verbatim transcript

1. Why do we need specialised Gerontology education programs instead of including ageing-related courses as part of social science or nursing programs?

Panellist 1

“Singapore is an ageing society and soon to become a super aged society ... we need people trained in skills to handle as well as helping seniors ... We need to understand what it is like to be a senior and if we want to be effective, we need to know the values, knowledge and skills... There's a lot of room for more programs to run well and there's a lot of interest in young people as well, not just career switches, but also young people as well who want to be part of this movement, I call it the ageing movement in Singapore.”

Panellist 2:

“So, if you look at the A&E surfaces and we have more elderly people going into... know about the elderly ... can provide better services. I have a few students that are working in A&E who told us about the challenges. So that's the reason why they come on board to study our gerontology Program ... in Canada, some of the hospitals have a gerontologist. This is something that we don't have in Singapore ... if we want to tackle the ageing issue, we need a multidisciplinary team.”

Panellist 3:

“Community care space is really expanding very rapidly. We really need people at the frontline who are managing these centres, who will encounter seniors and caregivers who are ageing themselves. To have the necessary skills to make these encounters pleasant enough so that these seniors and these families want to keep coming.”

Panellist 4

“Gerontologists threads multiple domains of knowledge and multiple skill sets, and what we need to do is to bring together ... Gerontologists who are trained would be able to plan and develop holistic programs and services and also formulate policies that consider these various domains of knowledge are right for the benefit of seniors ... I think if I may just give an analogy here ... family medicine is considered a specialisation, whereas previously it was really considered as just a GP level ... now it's recognized as a masters in medicine.”

Panellist 5

“Gerontology education ... prepares our society as we are going forward ... There's so much to learn ... it's practical you just have to cover it in depth through different courses ... fundamental base of knowledge that allows for communications across disciplines... It's not something that you get from just one or two courses in Social Science or Nursing Programs.”

2. Who is the target audience for Gerontology education programs, as perceived by educators?

Panellist 6

“People who have worked 20 years in another job and they're looking to enter the sector and they want to be a care worker. They know that they're not going to be doing clinical care ... they realise that ageing is an issue that impacts them ... they get to see their own parents ageing, and then they think about maybe their current career and their future career may not be the same.”

Panellist 7

“Fresh graduates ... we had somebody who was 69 ... People who want to become researchers, we have people who also want to like clinicians and nurses more in the field ... our courses stretch from biology to arts... Some people just do it for personal growth. I mean they (students enrolled in Gerontology Program) are ageing, they want to find out more about what this means and we have people obviously who are doing it for professional reasons and other reasons, yeah.”

Panellist 1

“A lot of people wanted to switch to gerontologists because they see themselves serving this group and they also learn for themselves.”

Panellist 4

“Three groups of people that we should target ... Basic general issues about ageing ... at a very broad level ... at the second level, I would say policy makers and program planners to be equipped with some knowledge... (choose a) graduate diploma level... Some of the core courses, for the purpose of program planning and understanding about ageing issues, appreciation of ageing and at the third level. Those who work directly with seniors, they really will need to be possessed with specialised domain knowledge and skill sets and even continuous upgrading.”

Panellist 2

“We should also have another category (added to Panellist 4’s three groups) ...We also have students from banking industry ... urban development ... (gerontology) program is they want to also learn about the aging because their works are all related...In Hong Kong, the government set up elder academy ... program from the kindergarten level to primary school to a secondary school ... Some of the kindergarten or primary schools ... have an Elder Academy Office within the school.”

Panellist 1

“How the knowledge of ageing could be shared with young children at primary school level...(stories) children like to hear ... they could relate to like grandparents or neighbours or being kind to others.”

3. What are the current challenges faced by Gerontology education programs?

Panellist 3

“A child that lives with grandparents, has got that personal experience ... really propel them to want to do something in this (Gerontology education) field... family makeup these days... young people are really not living very much in multi-gen. That kind (lives with grandparents) of personal experience will just become more and more infrequent. And it's all mostly through organised exposure now where the kids go to these venues on one off. I go to the nursing home, I sing songs, I perform and that's it.”

“How do we portray ourselves to be more attractive to 16, 17 year olds? Because about old people and straight away they're thinking ohh it's looking after the old and the sick and the dependent. But it's really more than just that. How do you pull them in, especially those who? Don't have personal experiences with grandparents or older people in their lives. That's a perennial struggle that we face in our full time program. Don't have personal experiences with grandparents or older people in their lives. That's a perennial struggle that we face in our full time program.”

“They (mid-career switcher) are a precious pool of students ... I really really attest to the observation that mid-career is. When they make that decision to pivot to this sector, they make that decision with a conviction because of their personal experience. And they're also at a live stage where they may no longer be the breadwinner of the family.”

“They (mid-career switcher) are prepared to take that pay cut to start from the bottom, if physically they are able to. But I find that the real pity is that I feel the sector. Like just now, we talked about Geron being a wide open field. I think the sector needs to also widen their perspectives on the value that mid-career can bring to the table, even if it's not immediately visible... You know someone who was a manager at the engineering company? She does for my social service (in Gerontology course). But I think just give them a try and you might realize that they bring a lot of value to the organisation. That's the call out I'd like to make if there's anyone in the audience here that are potential employers.”

Panellist 4

“First points here lack understanding and recognition about the program...Gerontology it's a relatively new discipline. For example, compared ... medicine or nursing or social work ... a lot of people are still not familiar ... decades ago, we didn't have to grapple with these ageing population issues... The second point ... broadness of gerontology. It is multidisciplinary, it encompasses so many disciplines and even with sub specialisations, for example, Social Gerontology, Educational Gerontology, Industry Gerontologists, just to name a few... Professionalize (a Gerontologist) so that people understand and also employ gerontologists like social workers and counsellors... body of knowledge ... constitute those core competencies and who should recognize these competencies? ... Standards ... What body should recognize that in society like the Singapore Association of Social Workers, the Singapore Association of Counselling. .. My suggestion here is to make it more manageable, we might just want to select one. Say for example, the health and social service sector... and work on developing these competencies.”

4. What are the gaps in employment status and career progression for Gerontology graduates based on feedback from graduates?

Panellist 3

“At the diploma site since 2019 ... the (gerontology) course focused on the business of ageing... we try to target industry partners who see the value of building gerontology graduates who understand the psyche of an older consumer. They can then better promote the various products and services or even customised programs and services for these older adults. Ground... in Singapore's landscape in the last five years or so, the focus has been on health and Wellness.”

“Graduates have expectations about starting pay they would like to get... the Community care sector recently underwent a salary revision and it's better now. But it's still not quite on par with the other sectors, like for example hospitality... our students do need look into remuneration recognition. Is there's still lots of room for improvement, but the jobs are there.”

Panellist 6

“Employers need to change their mindset ... (about) Geron students don't have to be paid the market rate...Geron students will be doing a lot of the work because ageing overlaps every sector of our economy. It's not just looking at healthcare sites or the aged care clinical site... (also in) marketing, community development, corporate development, and management roles.”

5. Should Gerontology be included in general education curricula?

Panellist 5

“A Gerontologist's core skills that ... Gerontologists in many other countries are trying to face Kenneth Ferraro in his book The Gerontology Imagination... has gerontology as a program, as a discipline... I guess negative stereotypes of ageing... are about health... Gerontology programs also take on that sort of image. (Gerontology students are) self selected groups of people who care about it coming to the program... General education curricula is one of the ways in which we can catch people at a younger age. ”

Panellist 1

“Society point of view ... In Singapore... the last 1012 years, relatively, it's very young ... whereas in other countries it's been around for 40-50 years. Secondly, we don't have licensing or we don't have. A specific organisation that will make a unified voice, perhaps at MOH level or MOM level to speak for the all graduates. Third point, industry mapping for the ageing sector... traditional thinking is still there that healthcare, commercial, social care, they're still breaking it up... when you want effective service for seniors or even silver business managers or CEOs, they also need a holistic perspective. I do see advertisements that say advertising for social workers/Gerontology manager, Counseling/Gerontology.”