An Examination of Opportunities and Challenges for Enhancing Post-Secondary Participation Rates among the Senior Population in Manitoba

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The reality that Manitoba’s population is rapidly aging comes as little surprise to most informed observers. The most recent census data collected by Statistics Canada (2006) shows that the segment of the elderly or senior population – 55 years of age and older – is increasing, while youth – those aged 35 and under – are decreasing. These demographic realities are not however, reflected in general college and undergraduate post-secondary participation rates at publicly-funded colleges and universities in Manitoba (Council on Post-Secondary Education, 2007b). In contrast, a traditional pattern of elevated youth enrollment, with senior participation remaining relatively stable, has resulted in the underrepresentation of seniors in both the college and university sectors in Manitoba (Council on Post-Secondary Education, 2007b).

These realities are of critical interest in respect to the long term sustainability of Manitoba’s post-secondary sector. The question of why seniors are underrepresented is one that the present research project examines from the standpoint of identifying the challenges and opportunities for enhancing the participation rate among this important demographic segment. It is believed that this research will make an important contribution to the current dialogue among institutional and government administrators concerning the formulation of strategies designed to mitigate declining enrollments, according to most recent projections from the Council on Post-Secondary Education (2007a) and the Council of Presidents of Universities of Manitoba (2007a, 2007b). Furthermore, it is believed that this study will also contribute to the construction of a long term model for institutional and sector sustainability beyond 2015.
In order to draw greater focus upon the inclusion of seniors within the development of the above strategies, this research study has examined the question of which factors, as identified by the research subjects themselves, comprise the most predominant influences on senior participation in post-secondary education. Furthermore, the study has also explored the question of what some of the most influential challenges and opportunities are, in terms of enhancing senior participation rates in the post-secondary sector. To this end, this research study highlights some of the most important personal and institutional influences that affect seniors’ decisions to participate or not participate in post-secondary education, while also identifying possible institutional supports that could be created to encourage and/or attract seniors’ participation.

By reviewing and highlighting relevant literature from the field of educational gerontology to the present research, this study confirms and validates the findings of earlier research concerning the principal factors and variables that influence senior participation in higher education. Furthermore, this study also contributes some new analysis of individual seniors’ attitudes, motivations, beliefs, behaviours and perspectives on participation and non-participation in university and college studies, based on the results of five semi-structured in-person interviews between the researcher and three participating and two non-participating seniors. The main intent of this study however, is to provide informed considerations for future policy directions and development concerning the enhanced participation of seniors in post-secondary education, under the primary assumption that such participation is desirable in the Manitoba context.
Literature Review

Much has been written and researched concerning access, participation and success in post-secondary education according to a “collective” notion of the senior. This is especially true in terms of defining seniors’ motivations— including general attitudes, beliefs, personal incentives and disincentives for participation (Mulenga & Liang, 2008; Romaniuk & Romaniuk, 1982; Wlodkowski, 1986); the general collective realities of seniors leading to their participation and non-participation— including economic, socio-cultural and historical factors (Battersby & Glendenning, 1992; Glendinning & Percy, 1990; Porter & Oliva, 2007; Su & Ferraro, 1997; Walker, 1996; Zunzunegui, Alvarado, Del Ser & Otero, 2003); as well as some of the prime factors and determinants which influence or impact upon seniors’ general ability to participate in post-secondary education. These factors include the biological/health and cognitive/intellectual effects of age (Agruso, 1978; Cross & Florio, 1978; Lumsden, 1985), transportation and mobility (Jette & Branch, 1992; Rosenbloom, 1993), physical accessibility of educational infrastructure (Price Zavotka, & Teaford, 2004), computer literacy and inclinations/disinclinations towards eLearning (Ansley & Erber, 1988; Dorin, 2007), application of gerontological learning styles and methods (John, 1988), and the use of educational accommodations and instructional adaptations to facilitate seniors’ academic success (Bolton, 1976).

However, in contrast to many of these earlier studies, the present research confirms that, as with many other segments of the general population, seniors are a highly diverse group comprised of several unique individuals and variant sub-groups. One need look no further than the wide variations and differences between each individual, to see
that the senior population in Manitoba is indeed a patchwork that is comprised of many threads; each of which serves to define the whole.

This diversification in the identity of individual seniors and the resulting diffusion of distinctive personal interests, does not readily promote the development of a common strategy or method for enhancing post-secondary participation among that segment which, for many years, has collectively been studied and analyzed as “seniors”. While it is possible to draw certain broad-based conclusions concerning the development of both government and institutional policies/initiatives in support of the “collective” needs of seniors— with a view to encouraging and facilitating senior participation in post-secondary education— it is the individual that continues to define what a successful educational programme and policy regime would look like. To be certain, the longstanding thought on the development of theory based on research, provides that the findings of individual level analyses often lend themselves to an ability to identify and extrapolate the broad-based supports that would serve to better address the needs of the whole, especially when similarities in need or experience are identified through the conduct of multiple interviews with individual seniors. Where many researchers have erred however, is in the immediate application of a quantitative approach that attempts to “aggregate” or pre-categorize the rich diversity of the senior population into formulaic “respondent data”, often in order to develop generalized findings and conclusions which in turn subjugate individuality to the larger context of the collective.

The analytical lens of this study draws upon that elaborated by Walker (1990) in her treatise on “The Politics of Provision and Participation”. This approach is rooted in an acknowledgement that it is through the qualitative study of individual seniors that
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particular needs and supports—relative to senior participation in post-secondary education—can be identified. This qualitative framework ensures continuing respect for a notion of “the senior” in the personal and therefore disaggregate form, with findings intimately connected to the stories shared by those individuals who participated in the research. This approach highlights the distinctive views of a small group of seniors concerning this topic, while inviting the reader to decide for him/herself, on the basis of supporting external research (as referenced above and within the discussion), whether these observations can be generalized and applied to the senior population as a whole. In consequence, this study analyzes the main topic by focusing both on the “infinite diversity” of the individuals who participated in this research study and on their stories, while enabling the reader to extrapolate whether these individuals serve as archetypes of “the average senior citizen” and thus, whether their stories bear common themes and elements that are both applicable to, and shared among other seniors.

Methods

In order to explore the challenges and opportunities for enhancing senior participation, the researcher employed a qualitative framework of inquiry involving the conduct of five in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individual seniors who currently reside in Winnipeg. The average age of the subjects was 71.6 years, with the youngest study participant being in his late 50s and the oldest study participant being in her mid-90s. The researcher felt that it was important that the experiences and views of both participating and non-participating seniors be reflected in the overall examination of this topic. To this end, three interviews were conducted with seniors who have participated in the college sector (Edward), as well as in university sector studies at both
the undergraduate (Dan) and graduate (Joan) levels of study. It was felt by the researcher that all three educational experiences were of significant difference and would inform the content of the subtleties of these overall experiences. Two further interviews were conducted with non-participating seniors; one of whom was qualified by the experience of the early retirement years (55 to 70 years of age– Larry) and one senior who was qualified by the experience of the later retirement years (70+ years of age– Mary). Here again, the researcher felt that there would be important differences in the experience of non-participating seniors due to the factor of age, life and post-retirement experience. These interview participants were identified in advance by the researcher based on his general knowledge of the post-secondary sector in Manitoba, as well as his pre-established rapport with a variety of citizens based on extensive personal networks and participation in community-based organizations. None of the identified study participants was a personal friend, acquaintance, or family member of the researcher and the researcher did not exercise any power or privilege over any of the participants.

Procedures

This research occurred over the period from September 2008 to December 2008. The purpose of these interviews was to provide the participants with an opportunity to “tell their own story” according to a semi-structured format. The research questionnaire that was developed by the researcher allowed the study participants to describe their own experience and perspectives on post-secondary education, with an opportunity to pose questions of interest based on the responses that were provided during the course of the interview. One questionnaire was developed for seniors who had recently participated, and one questionnaire was developed for those seniors who had not recently participated
in post-secondary education. As the research purposed to capture the diversity of perspectives and experiences between these two groups, it was felt by the researcher that the administration of a common questionnaire instrument would be insufficient for this prime objective. Two distinctive questionnaires were therefore developed, with seven questions that were the same or similar and seventeen questions that were different between the two questionnaires (including eight in the participating seniors’ questionnaire, which focused on capturing participatory experiences, and nine in the non-participants’ questionnaire, which focused on capturing non-participatory perspectives and experiences). The questionnaires were developed with a view to capturing the motivations, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, experiences and perspectives of seniors on participation and non-participation.

The interviews occurred at a time and place that was mutually agreed upon and convenient for both the participants and the researcher and included a doughnut shop, a fast food restaurant, a dine-in restaurant, an on campus faculty building, and one participant’s apartment. On average, the interviews lasted for 43.2 minutes, with the longest interview being 56 minutes and the shortest interview being 37 minutes in duration. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Transcripts of the in-depth interviews were mailed or e-mailed to the interviewees for member checks to verify accuracy of content, at which point the participants were also free to amend the information on the transcripts should they have so desired. Only minor amendments were made to two interview transcripts, mainly for purposes of maintaining anonymity or providing further clarification. All interviewees were expressly notified of the purpose for the research study, the voluntary nature of their participation and ability
to withdraw from the study (both subsequent and consequent to the actual conduct of the research), with guarantees for the anonymity and confidentiality of all study participants at all times during the reporting and presentation of the research.

In terms of analyzing the stories and perspectives that were shared during the course of the interviews, the researcher sought to categorize the findings according to two principal frames of reference. The first frame of reference, personal and institutional supports that affect seniors’ decisions to participate or not participate in post-secondary education, was chosen as a lens for studying the intrinsic and external influences that serve to encourage or discourage individual motivation for participation in higher education. The second focal point, comprised of supports that can serve to encourage or attract seniors’ participation in post-secondary education, was used to identify data in the interviews that relate to those external realities that can be used to foster individual motivation to participate in higher education. Those themes that arose most frequently in the study participants’ narratives, comprise the primary focal point for sharing and discussing the findings of the interviews, with the understanding that these themes tend to affect all of the seniors who were selected for the study. Where applicable however, divergences of perspective have also been included in the findings of this report, as it is felt by the researcher that the full diversity of views, as gathered from each senior, are equally as important to determining those factors that bear a positive and negative relationship to their participation or non-participation in higher education.

Findings

*Personal and Institutional Supports that Affect Seniors’ Decisions to Participate or Not Participate in Post-Secondary Education*
In terms of the personal influences that were highlighted by the interviewees in terms of participation in post-secondary education, several important factors tended to encourage participation. These factors included: support and encouragement from friends, family members and other persons who were respected by the interviewees (all three participants– Edward, Joan and Dan– highlighted the centrality of encouragement in their decision to take up studies, while Mary and Larry had encouraged and supported others when attending post-secondary education); the opportunity of education, especially in terms of availability of courses and programs based on location, scheduling and timing; alignment of course and program offerings with personal interests; appreciation and enjoyment of learning for its own sake; openness to new experiences; the ability to make continuing contributions to society or act as a role model for succeeding generations; the use of education to gradually adjust from a fast-paced work environment into retirement; and the perceived contribution of education to the development of social relationships, as well as to enhanced longevity, health and well-being.

In terms of the personal factors that had a tendency to discourage or de-motivate participation: rigidity of class schedules and requirements; conflicts between course requirements and personal interests / schedules; perceptions of age (e.g. being “too old” to participate); limited personal accessibility and mobility; perceptions of academic settings as “the ivory tower”– unwelcoming to those with limited educational attainment and a deterrent to those who wish to live their lives free from constraints of schedule, obligation and commitment while in retirement or old age; impaired health; and perhaps of some notable importance, limited computer literacy and access to computerized
technology, with reference to potentially steep learning curves when technology is involved in course and program delivery.

Computer literacy was an important theme in most interviews, both from a personal and institutional standpoint. Edward spoke the most about computers, highlighting some of the difficulties that may be encountered for some seniors... because they’re not computer literate and they don’t know about the menu systems specifically. A lot of them only have phones and stuff. Like my 83 year old mother’s not very good at navigating this stuff as well as my parents-in-law. They are in their 80s. And they’re not too good at it because they didn’t grow up with it.

Joan remarked that in terms of senior perceptions, computers may even evoke fears–there is still a fear of computers. Ninety percent of your work is online or you have to submit your work online or if you want to communicate with your professor it is done by e-mail. That would be a big factor I think, for some seniors as well. A fear of computers I guess is what it is.

Larry reinforced this perception with his observation that “discouraging-wise… some people might find things scary in the high-tech world especially and because things are changing so fast.” However, in Larry’s view

It is hard to generalize. Just because people are retired or are a senior, a lot of them have kept up with stuff [new technologies] because when it came out fifteen or twenty years ago, they were already in on it. But most people not, I think. Depends on what the retired people do, I think.

Dan commented on some of the difficulties that he experienced given his professor’s use of an electronic feature on the institutional website.

You gotta be able to work the internet and everything well... you know there’s JUMP...

Well I didn’t know what the heck JUMP was. I thought JUMP was e-mail. It turns out
that it wasn’t ‘til the course was all over I’d found some course notes had been put on JUMP. I wasn’t aware they were there.

When asked if she was interested at all in the computers, Mary commented

Not now... I am definitely interested in computers but I don’t want one… I go to my son’s and he has one and he kind of puts me on something that I am looking up or what not.

The theme of personal mobility and accessibility of program delivery also featured large in most interviews. Joan mentioned that

I know that University of Winnipeg offers these courses at the University. If they were to offer them in seniors homes or in local community clubs were it would not be too far to get to, I think that would certainly help. Some of the seniors in seniors homes would love to take these courses but they just can’t get to them. I think that would certainly help. And I don’t always think that for seniors, the finances are as important as their ability to physically get to them.

Edward supported this view with his statement that programming must be sensitive to the social practicalities for seniors. Some of them can’t get out, some of them are in wheelchairs. I have a friend who is 65 and pretty soon she is going to be in a wheelchair. She’s in a walker now but you know, go to the places like seniors houses. And not just the ones that are taking care of them uh, assisted living. But also the ones that seniors live in and they’re not handicapped in any way. If you take it there, because personally, most people will… wait for someone to come to them personally and who has a sense of where they’re coming from. If you want to help somebody to do something or motivate them to do it, you got to pretty well do it that way all the time… how the government would do that I’m not sure but uh, personal involvement requires personal
uh, going out to the person you want to involve. If you just send out a letter and say, if you want to sign up, big deal. You know, most people would just throw it away. An interesting observation from the researcher’s point of view however, is that the above comments were made from the standpoint of the factors that may enable other seniors to participate in post-secondary education and as such were not applicable to the interviewees themselves. Edward relied on transit to attend his courses, while Joan had her own vehicle. Dan lived within proximity to the campus and walked to school every day except during winters, when he also rode transit. Larry had his own vehicle and Mary was highly mobile in support of her participation in the community (by walking, arranging for transportation and taking transit).

Furthermore, when given the option of distance offerings of courses or programs as a preferred mode of delivery (either face-to-face or by correspondence), Dan responded that he would prefer

On campus first, recognizing that there is going to be a need to take part of the course through these electronic modalities. And it would be my second one but there would definitely have to be a blend. If it was on campus for the major part and electronic for the minor.

Larry responded “face to face either on campus or off campus”, while Joan replied “on campus with a class, face to face”. Mary specified “in small groups like at United College, at the University of Winnipeg”. Edward stated that

I think it’s whatever the senior can do. I mean, if you are not computer literate, you have to teach them how to do things computer wise, which means going to them. Once they get that knowledge, then you can use electronic transfer of information and stuff.
That the participants in larger proportion preferred on-campus course delivery and exhibited elevated levels of personal mobility and access to transportation should not, however, discount both Edward and Joan’s observations concerning the need for institutional outreach and support programs, or their valuable comments on mobility factors as barriers to pursuing on-campus education.

In light of the apparent incentive for seniors to take courses under the Government of Manitoba’s tuition waiver, the researcher also inquired about specific individual financial abilities relative to investing in higher education. Edward stated that he “was sponsored, so getting the sponsorship was harder than getting the courses so to speak” (Edward did not qualify for the waiver, because of his age). When asked if they thought that seniors would attend if they had to pay tuition fees and textbooks, Joan replied that “finances are always a question. It’s still a question!” (Joan was pursuing courses to which the waiver was not applicable) while Mary specified that “if they are interested enough they will. They definitely would” (interestingly, Mary’s cited topic of interest, in terms of pursuing a course, would also be exempted from tuition waiver applicability). Larry mused that “that wouldn’t bother me. That would be like paying the golf fees if you wanted to golf. I wouldn’t expect it to be free” (Larry was not aware of the waiver), while Dan equivocally emphasized that “if I had to pay the full shot, I wouldn’t be here. Period” (Dan was the only senior participant in post-secondary studies who qualified for the waiver). Dan also commented that in terms of finances,

I think it would be, in general, yes it would be a disincentive. I think that if the seniors knew they were getting a discounted fee of some sort, that would be more in keeping with the mentality of a senior. Um, because you get everything else discounted.
It is noteworthy that, even in light of financial pressures and across the spectrum of personal participation or non-participation, all of the seniors interviewed for this study felt that post-secondary education was an activity that was or would be worthy of their own personal financial investment, whether in sum total or under a cost-sharing scenario.

**Institutional Supports to Encourage/Attract Seniors’ Participation in Post-Secondary Education**

Beyond the interviewees’ above remarks concerning the possibility for institutions to explore community outreach models in terms of the delivery of post-secondary education, several themes and interesting ideas emerged from the interviews in terms of possible institutional supports that may encourage and/or attract seniors to participate in post-secondary education. Edward, Joan and Dan suggested that it was incumbent upon the institutions to promote better awareness of programs, so as to provide seniors with an idea of the opportunities that are available to them. Among non-participants, Larry and Mary had general awareness of the institutions and what they offered but both referenced the idea of a Leisure Guide model as something that the institutions may wish to develop in order to expand awareness beyond the scope of general marketing and advertising campaigns. The ability of seniors to access in-person assistance, as well as a need for greater ease of use when navigating through the “bureaucracy and procedures” of institutional culture, also factored into the discussion. Among participants, the centrality of individual teaching/learning styles and needs figured largely in the responses, while for non-participants, the centrality of personal interests and life goals seemed to suggest that, irrespective of the supports provided, their
participation would be very limited into the future. When asked if he had ever considered the possibility of re-enrolling, Larry for instance, remarked that

    I have thought of it at times. Basically just out of interest or in a hobby mode. You know, things that I enjoyed and maybe subjects that I enjoyed in high school but didn’t take in post-secondary that I would like to maybe take at university level now. Just as an interest. But I haven’t done it and I probably won’t, I think… Main reason I would do it is just personal interest. And for not doing it, the reason would be that it may tie me down time wise. We seem to be going away quite a bit. Basically I don’t want to be retired and going to a schedule.

Mary also commented that

    Taking a course at the university would be very fulfilling I think. But I think it’s a bit late now. No, it’s never too late but I don’t feel like I would be able to keep up with a course now… maybe I have missed doing something by not taking these courses and furthering my education but you know you can learn a lot about life without going to school and I think that I’ve probably made the most of that side of life.

In terms of specific things that the institutions might do to encourage senior participation, Dan highlighted the potential for in-person orientation sessions

    If there were more orientation sessions, or even a few, for seniors at a university— if it was somehow put in the newspaper so that they became aware that, on such and such a day, you could go and spend a few hours and… be brought up to date on what is available to you as a senior.

    Dan also commented that lack of awareness concerning seniors’ abilities to audit courses, without all of the academic requirements of exams and essays, might promote greater participation. The researcher posits that this might also respond to those non-participating seniors who may feel that the “ivory tower” is too tall and too imposing to
climb. Dan also referenced the “quote unquote visible minority” factor as an influence in making adjustment to on-campus life for many seniors a challenge. In the same vein, Edward felt that, although no one had specifically treated him with disrespect, mainly because he was pursuing courses with mostly other mature students, there was less likelihood that he would feel excluded from the general student body because of this very reason. Integration of seniors into mainstream campus activities as fellow students and also within classroom environments as learned elders, was cited as an important means of promoting greater social inclusion by institutions.

Finally, while Joan, Edward and Dan had all indicated excellent overall experiences with their educational pursuits (Edward emphatically stated that his experience was 99% positive for instance), a theme that did emerge from each interview included an identified need for greater inclusiveness and sensitivity training for faculty and instructors relative to general student participation in class. This factor was not expressed in terms of the treatment that the participants had received as seniors per se, but rather, the occasional approach used by the instructors in class when relating to their students, which could be non-inclusive, dismissive or disrespectful of others’ opinions and contributions, or which gave the impression of “singling out” certain students. Again however, the participants indicated highly positive experiences while enrolled in their programs.

This positive outlook also extended to both the study participants’ perspectives on learning in the third age, and also on the notion of lifelong learning. When asked how they would respond to those who might believe that either it is too late in life or that there is no purpose for enrolling in higher education, Dan stated that it is “never too late to
enroll in studies”, while he also cited that “there’s a physiological benefit to keeping your mind active”, and that “it is a great opportunity for interfacing with young people”. Edward stated “it doesn’t matter if you are half-dead you could still learn something”, while elaborating that “if you’re ten years old or a hundred years old, there is so much that you can do”. Joan would encourage fellow seniors with the advice to “take one course and see how you feel at the end of it… The more I learn, the more I discover, the more I realize how much I don’t know… so go and find out what you don’t know!”

Furthermore, the non-participants also provided valuable insight on their perspectives of lifelong learning. Mary for instance, mused “I don’t know why I’ve never gone to any of them [classes]. It just seems that, well I didn’t take the initiative, I guess”. She continued these thoughts with the comment that her “daughter… thinks that maybe I should be taking some of these courses… I just can’t see me going for some reason or rather. But I’m all for it!” The existence of such positive views on education among seniors, even in light of many of these same seniors’ continuing “disconnects” from such learning environments, is posited as an important duality that can be used by post-secondary institutions for helping seniors to establish their own personal connection to continuing education by highlighting the relevance of course and program offerings to their daily lives. The comments offered by Larry provide further instruction in this regard. Emphasizing informal learning as part of his preference for continuing education, Larry stated that “I enjoyed school when I went to school but being away from school I don’t miss it either. You know what I mean? I just maybe enjoy sitting and reading a book than going to a lecture on that topic”. When asked what would convince him to take up more formal studies, he replied “Ah, maybe if a friend of mine was taking the same
course and enjoyed it— that might convince me. Or if that course would improve something in my retirement living, like managing something, whether it is finances or interests— something that was an improvement towards managing your life”. Clearly, the ability of formal institutions of higher learning to help seniors appreciate the intimate connections between existing learning opportunities and the realities of these seniors’ daily lives is integral to building an institutional culture that is inclusive of all interests within the societies that they serve. It is lastly posited that, should institutions find that they are unable to define the relevance of their institutional mandates for such interests, it is then incumbent upon them to adapt their learning environments in order to better respond to such realities. The realization of this truth is important for constructing an institutional focus that is both legitimately inclusive and that further supports genuine definitions of lifelong learning.

**Conclusion**

The preceding report has provided a very basic analysis of the many views and perspectives that were shared with the researcher by the five interviewees who took part in this research study. While there are many additional themes and ideas that emerged from the interviews, the principal factors that influence participation and non-participation and the institutional supports that have been discussed have been included by way of responding to the central question posed at the outset of this study. There is an old adage which states that for every challenge there is an opportunity. In keeping with this sage advice, the following items represent some opportunity and challenge areas upon which government and institutional administrators can direct further focus, by means of sustaining enrollments through enhanced senior participation.
While different from other participants in post-secondary education, the seniors who were interviewed for this study exhibit the same features as any other student in terms of motivation, needs and support. In general, the more encouragement that was received, the more they were made to feel welcome and included in support of their participation (through community and campus outreach, individualized adaptation according to teaching/learning style, and availability of transport and mobility) and the more awareness and exposure they had concerning the availability of programs and opportunities that exist for lifelong study in formal settings, the greater was each seniors’ tendency to participate in post-secondary education.

In the abstract, the interviewees—both participants and non-participants—highlighted the requirement to have their individual needs met by institutions. This was stated in terms of respect for their role as older members of society with need for specialized learning opportunities and accommodations (especially in view of the predominant use of computers and other technologies in the classroom); respect for their personal interests and lifestyles; and the general desire to pursue education at their own pace (often stated in terms of the perceived challenges posed by strict observance to academic regulations, standards, requirements and methods). While the participants each possessed knowledge of technologies through their participation in higher education, each cited the challenge of adapting to new technologies as a particular barrier that must be overcome, if other seniors are to participate in post-secondary education in a meaningful way.

As with the general population, there is a perception among some seniors that education is “not for them”. Age, personal lifestyle choices and general lack of incentive
or motivation “at the current time” were referred to by the non-participants as the prime factors that influenced them from abstaining from further formal education. Both of the non-participants however, indicated that under the right circumstances they would be interested in further education, with special emphasis on the potential to meet their needs through learning opportunities that tend to reflect both the modalities and realities of nonformal and informal learning. Government and institutional administrators can perhaps better encourage participation both by meeting this need for informal and nonformal education within a formal context, as well as by examining the relevance and connection between current educational opportunities and the interests that seniors may have in such opportunities. It is important to understand that our post-secondary institutions can adapt their current mandates so as to truly support and provide lifelong learning opportunities— even and especially for those members of our society who continue to enjoy life well into the “third age”, – a segment that is steadily growing and increasing according to the demographic realities of this province.

While there are many more challenge and opportunity areas on which to concentrate, the above three areas represent a good starting point for commencing efforts designed to enhance senior participation. As demonstrated at the outset of this report, seniors are a growing and important part of Manitoba society. Unfortunately, they are also a segment of our population that, for too long, has been overlooked in strategies designed to sustain our educational institutions. It is the view taken by this research that seniors can and should make an important contribution to sustaining the future of education in this province through their inclusion in such strategies. The above analysis supports the view that seniors demonstrate overall positive attitudes towards post-
secondary education, even if they themselves do not participate in it. The most important common theme was that learning was something that remains of great interest, no matter the age or lifestyle of those who were interviewed. In this respect, the key to attaining our targets for sustaining enrollments into the future may well be our collective ability to tap into this positive outlook by providing an encouraging and inclusive environment in which all Manitobans can learn and mature together, according to individual need and, where applicable, the collective realities of shared generational realities.

In terms of implications for further and future research, it must be noted that the framework that is used to report the findings of this research confines its focus to the individual experiences of the five seniors who were interviewed for this study. In future, should research intend to focus on constructing a more detailed model for enhancing senior participation, the researcher would encourage the conduct of interviews with a much larger group, including members of variant or sub-groups that are reflective of the greater diversity of the senior population as a whole. The researcher feels that further interviews within each of these categories would further enhance our understanding of the senior as a participant or non-participant in post-secondary education, while capturing a greater multiplicity of views and perspectives on post-secondary education.

Finally, while it is hoped that the findings and analysis that are reported in this study will provide a firm foundation on which to build further opportunities for dialogue on this important topic, it is acknowledged that this study has constituted only a starting point for greater focus on educational gerontology within the Manitoba context. In addition to the enlargement of the scope of this research, Manitoba’s educational community is encouraged to explore further supports and methods for integrating seniors.
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