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Integrating Ageing Across Higher Education Curriculum for Age-Friendly Communities †

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Abstract

Population ageing has significant social and economic implications across sectors, including health, urban planning, technology, education, and public policy. However, education on ageing remains largely concentrated within health and social care disciplines, limiting broader societal and workforce preparedness. Higher education institutions have a key role in shaping professional competencies and societal responses to demographic change. This paper proposes a framework for integrating ageing across higher education curricula as a foundation for developing age-friendly communities, adopting a conceptual and policy-informed approach. The framework was informed by international healthy ageing and ageism frameworks, age-friendly university principles, and contemporary literature on ageing education and intergenerational learning. The sources were synthesised to identify three interconnected domains for integration: curriculum and teaching, research, and service and community engagement. The proposed framework embeds ageing literacy across these university functions and across faculties such as health sciences, social sciences, technology, and the built environment. Anticipated outcomes include improved ageing literacy, reduced ageism, and better preparation of graduates to engage with ageing populations in diverse professional contexts. As universities are key contributors to ageing literacy and workforce preparedness, this approach offers a practical pathway towards more inclusive, age-friendly societies. Future work should focus on piloting and evaluating the framework in different institutional and cultural contexts.

Keywords: age-friendly community; ageing literacy; curriculum integration; higher education; social preparedness

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1. Introduction

Population ageing is one of the most significant demographic transformations of the 21st century, driven by declining fertility and increasing life expectancy. These changes are reshaping population structures globally, resulting in an increasing proportion of older adults and associated shifts in societal needs [1]. While ageing is often considered within the context of healthcare demand, its implications extend across multiple sectors, including urban planning, education, technology, labour markets, and public policy [2]. Consequently, preparing societies for ageing populations requires a broader, more integrated approach that goes beyond clinical and care-based responses.

Despite the cross-sectoral nature of population ageing, education on ageing remains largely concentrated within health and social care disciplines. As a result, graduates from other fields often lack the knowledge and competencies to engage effectively with ageing populations in their respective professions [3]. This limits the ability of societies to respond holistically to demographic change and may perpetuate ageist assumptions or poorly designed systems that fail to meet the needs of older adults.

International frameworks provide further support for a broader role of higher education in responding to population ageing. The United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021–2030 emphasises multisectoral and multistakeholder action, including changing how societies think, feel, and act towards age and ageing and developing age-friendly communities [4]. Within higher education, the Age-Friendly University principles similarly promote lifelong and intergenerational learning, participation of older adults, ageing-related research, and engagement with organisations representing older people [5]. A recent scoping review further identified interdisciplinary collaboration and strong university–community partnerships as important components of age-friendly universities [5]. Together, these perspectives provide a rationale for embedding ageing-related knowledge and competencies across disciplines and broader university functions.

Higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to address this gap. Universities serve as key sites for knowledge production, professional training, and community engagement. Thus, integrating ageing into higher education curricula represents an upstream and strategic intervention that can enhance workforce preparedness, promote ageing literacy, and support the development of age-friendly communities [6]. This paper proposes a whole-of-university conceptual framework for achieving such integration across curriculum, research, and service and community engagement.

2. Conceptual Approach and Framework Development

This paper adopts a conceptual and policy-informed approach to examine how ageing can be systematically integrated into higher education. The analysis draws on global demographic trends, healthy ageing frameworks, and existing patterns of ageing education within universities. Ageing is conceptualised as a cross-cutting societal issue that can be embedded across academic faculties, research activities, and institutional functions. This aligns with a whole-of-university perspective, positioning higher education institutions as central actors in advancing ageing-related knowledge, skills, and societal engagement.

The sources informing the framework were identified purposively based on their relevance to ageing, higher education, and age-friendly approaches. These included international policy frameworks, particularly the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021–2030 and the Global Report on Ageism, Age-Friendly University principles and literature [4–8], and recent evidence on ageing education and intergenerational learning. These sources were considered to identify recurring areas through which universities can contribute to ageing-related education and societal engagement. These areas were subsequently organised around three core university functions: curriculum and teaching, research, and service and community engagement, which form the basis of the proposed framework. As this represents a conceptual synthesis rather than a systematic review, the proposed framework is intended to be adapted and empirically evaluated in future implementation.

3. Current Gaps in Ageing Education

The current approach to ageing education tends to be characterised by disciplinary concentration, fragmented understanding, and limited interdisciplinary engagement. Ageing-related content is most commonly located within health sciences, nursing, public health, and social work programmes. This concentration results in minimal exposure for stu-

dents in other fields such as engineering, business, information technology, and the built environment, which are relevant for an ageing population.

This disciplinary siloing and fragmented understanding of ageing may result in graduates lacking awareness of demographic trends, underestimating the societal implications of ageing, or failing to recognise the relevance of ageing within their professional domains. This may also reinforce ageist stereotypes or assumptions, further constraining inclusive practice. Ageism is particularly relevant in this context, as stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination based on age may influence attitudes and practices [7]. Educational interventions and intergenerational contact have been identified as evidence-informed strategies for addressing ageism, providing an additional rationale for integrating ageing across higher education [7,8].

In addition, ageing-related teaching and research within universities are often conducted in isolation, with limited collaboration across faculties or integration into institutional strategies. Opportunities for interdisciplinary learning, joint research, and community engagement are often underutilised. These gaps highlight the need for a more coordinated and systemic approach to embedding ageing across higher education.

4. A Whole-of-University Framework for Ageing Integration

A whole-of-university framework provides a structured approach to integrating ageing across higher education systems. This recognises that ageing is not confined to a single discipline but is relevant across a wide range of academic and professional domains [9]. This approach complements the Age-Friendly University principles, which promote age-inclusive education, intergenerational learning, ageing-related research, and engagement with older people and their communities [5]. The present framework extends this perspective by focusing specifically on the systematic integration of ageing across academic disciplines and the university functions of teaching, research, and service.

At the level of academic faculties, ageing can be incorporated into diverse disciplines. In health sciences, while topics such as frailty, dementia, chronic disease management, and palliative care are discussed, healthy ageing and preventive approaches should also be emphasised [10]. In social sciences, ageing can be examined through perspectives including social participation, psychological wellbeing, and environmental gerontology. Scientific and technological disciplines can contribute through the development of digital health systems, artificial intelligence applications, and assistive technologies. Engineering and the built environment can consider age-friendly housing, transport systems, and universal design, while business and economics may engage with ageing populations through areas such as the "silver economy," financial planning, and service innovation [11]. Education disciplines can contribute through lifelong learning and intergenerational programmes [12].

Beyond teaching, universities also play a key role in generating interdisciplinary research on ageing. This includes policy research on long-term care systems, environmental studies on climate resilience, and data-driven approaches to population health and service planning. Such integration reflects the complexity of ageing as a societal issue and a need for coordinated knowledge production.

This framework also recognises the role of universities in engaging with broader societal stakeholders, including government, communities, and industry. These links enable the translation of knowledge into practice and support the development of age-friendly systems and communities. Across these domains, older people may contribute not only as beneficiaries or research participants, but also as partners in teaching, research, and community engagement [5,13].

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5. Proposed Curriculum Integration Model

A three-tier model for integrating ageing into higher education is proposed, encompassing curriculum, research, and service functions. The proposed whole-of-university model for integrating ageing across curriculum, research, and service domains is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Whole-of-University Integration of Ageing Across Higher Education.

Domain	Approach to Integration	Examples Across Disciplines	Anticipated Outcomes
Curriculum (Teaching)	Embed ageing within existing modules; use case-based and problem-based learning; develop interdisciplinary electives	Engineering (assistive devices), ICT (digital inclusion), built environment (universal design)	Improvement in ageing literacy and attitudes towards ageing; greater workforce preparedness to work with ageing populations
Research	Promote interdisciplinary research; align student projects with ageing-related priorities; integrate policy and practice perspectives	Technology (AI, digital health), Social sciences (participation, well-being), Policy (long-term care systems)	Potential for interdisciplinary innovation; development of an ageing-related evidence base; greater alignment between research and policy and practice priorities
Service & Community Engagement	Develop service-learning programmes; partner with community organisations; support intergenerational initiatives	Digital literacy training for older adults; community health promotion; student-led engagement projects	Experiential and intergenerational learning; opportunities for social participation; strengthened community-university partnerships

These outcomes are proposed or anticipated effects of the framework, have not been empirically demonstrated by the present study, and should be evaluated during future implementation. Abbreviations: ICT: Information and Communication Technology; AI: Artificial Intelligence.

At the first tier of curriculum and teaching, ageing should be embedded within existing modules across disciplines, rather than standalone courses or modules. This may involve incorporating ageing-related case studies and problem-based learning scenarios that reflect real-world demographic trends. Interdisciplinary electives can also be developed to facilitate cross-faculty learning. For example, engineering students may engage in the design of assistive devices, business students may analyse ageing consumer markets, and information technology students may explore digital inclusion for older adults. Such approaches are intended to strengthen ageing literacy while maintaining disciplinary relevance.

Through the second tier of research, universities can strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration by encouraging projects that address ageing from multiple perspectives. Student research can be aligned with broader societal priorities, particularly innovations in areas such as technology, policy, and service delivery. Such collaboration may contribute to a more comprehensive evidence base for addressing ageing-related challenges.

The third tier involves service and community engagement. Universities can develop programmes that involve direct interaction with older adults, such as service-learning initiatives and partnerships with community organisations. These activities may provide experiential and intergenerational learning opportunities for students while creating opportunities for older adults to participate in university-community activities [14].

The whole-of-university framework represents the institutional core of the proposed model. Appendix A extends this model beyond a single institution to illustrate how university activities might connect with other higher education institutions, government agencies, community organisations, and other sectors within a whole-of-nation approach. The whole-of-nation framework should therefore be understood as an extension of, rather than an alternative to, the three-domain university model.

6. Potential Implications for Age-Friendly Communities

Integrating ageing into higher education has significant implications for the development of age-friendly communities. Improved ageing literacy across disciplines may contribute to a workforce that is better prepared to design inclusive systems, services, and environments. Graduates entering fields such as urban planning, technology, education, and business may be better equipped to consider the needs and perspectives of older adults in their work. Evidence suggests that exposure to ageing-related content and interactions with older individuals may help reduce ageist attitudes by challenging stereotypes and fostering empathy [7,8,15]. This may contribute to shaping societal attitudes and promoting intergenerational understanding, which are important components of age-friendly communities.

At a broader level, universities may contribute to policy development and system-level change through interdisciplinary research and collaboration with stakeholders. Such collaboration may support the development of more inclusive and responsive ageing-related policies in alignment with global priorities on healthy ageing and sustainable development [4].

7. Implementation Considerations and Future Directions

Several practical factors should be addressed to support implementation. Curriculum structures are often already saturated; thus, introducing new content requires careful alignment with existing learning outcomes rather than the addition of new modules. Faculty capacity is an important factor, as not all educators have expertise in ageing-related topics. This requires faculty development, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the use of shared teaching resources.

Institutional silos are significant barriers to integration, as faculties and departments often operate independently. Encouraging cross-disciplinary initiatives and creating institutional incentives for collaboration will be important in overcoming these challenges. Leadership support at the university level can further facilitate integration by embedding ageing within strategic priorities [16].

Implementation will also depend on institutional readiness and available resources, including staff time, administrative support, and mechanisms for cross-faculty coordination. Engagement with students, older people, community organisations, and other relevant stakeholders may help ensure that implementation is contextually appropriate and responsive to local priorities.

Future work should focus on piloting and evaluating curriculum integration models in different institutional contexts. This includes assessing outcomes such as changes in student knowledge, attitudes towards ageing, and readiness to work with older populations. Comparative studies across institutions and regions may also provide insights into effective approaches and contextual adaptations.

8. Conclusions

Population ageing is a complex and cross-cutting issue that requires coordinated responses across sectors. Higher education institutions play a critical role in shaping these responses by integrating ageing into curricula, research, and community engagement.

This paper proposed a whole-of-university approach to embed ageing across higher education. This approach offers a potential practical pathway towards developing more inclusive and age-friendly communities, with anticipated outcomes including improved ageing literacy, reduced ageist attitudes, and better preparation of graduates for engagement with ageing populations. Continued efforts to implement and evaluate such models will be essential in advancing this agenda.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

ICT	Information and Communication Technology
AI	Artificial Intelligence

Appendix A

This whole-of-nation illustration extends the whole-of-university framework by situating its teaching, research, and service functions within a wider national ecosystem. It is intended as an illustrative stakeholder map rather than an empirically validated governance structure, and the activities shown represent potential areas for collaboration.

The Figure A1 illustrates how ageing can be integrated across higher education institutions and broader societal systems through a coordinated, whole-of-nation approach in Brunei Darussalam. Academic faculties may contribute by embedding ageing-related content within discipline-specific curricula. This includes both health-related fields, where ageing is traditionally addressed, and non-health disciplines such as social sciences, technology, business, and the built environment. In Brunei, this can be led by the main tertiary institution (Universiti Brunei Darussalam), consisting of academic and service faculties, as well as its research institutions and centres. Other higher institutions also play a role in advancing ageing curricula. While academic and research institutions play a key role, linkages with external stakeholders, including government agencies, community organisations, and industry partners are essential. Potential areas of involvement for government ministries and departments in the ageing research agenda are also illustrated.

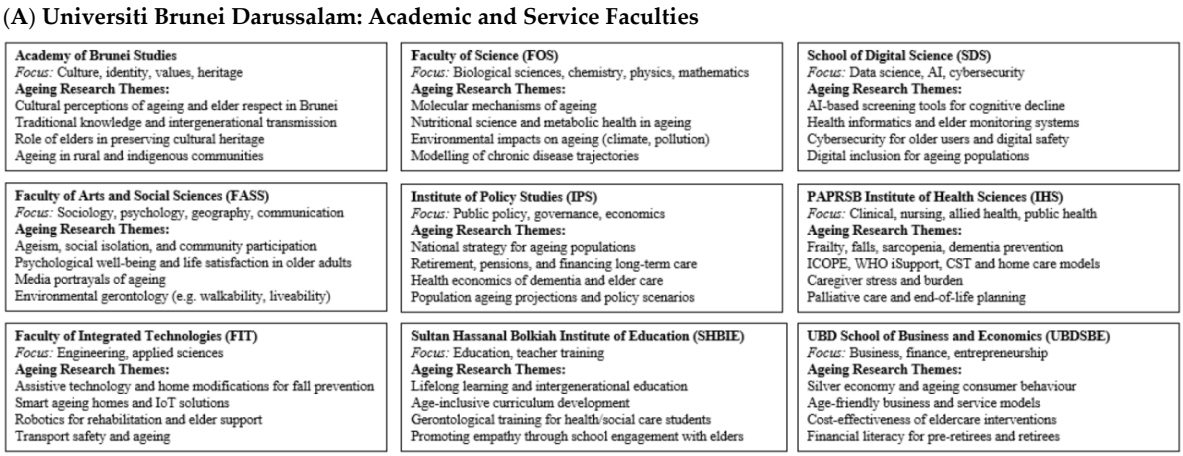


Figure A1. *Cont.*

(B) Universiti Brunei Darussalam: Research Institutions and Centres

Centre for Advanced Material and Energy Sciences (CAMES)
Potential Role:
Energy-efficient solutions for elder housing
Sustainable materials for assistive devices

Centre for Advanced Research (CARe)
Potential Role:
Interdisciplinary projects on healthy ageing
Translational research for national ageing strategy
Policy briefs on long-term care financing

Institute for Leadership, Innovation and Advancement (ILIA)
Potential Role:
Leadership training for ageing sector workforce
Governance innovation in elder care systems

Institute for Biodiversity and Environmental Research (IBER)
Potential Role:
Climate resilience and older adults
Impact of environmental hazards on elder health
Biodiversity and nature engagement for elder well-being

Sultan Omar 'Ali Saifuddien Centre for Islamic Studies (SOASCIS)
Potential Role:
Islamic ethics of care and ageing
Ageing with dignity and Islamic end-of-life perspectives
Waqf and zakat models for elder support

Institute of Asian Studies (IAS)
Potential Role:
Comparative ageing across Southeast Asia
Migration, ageing, and transnational families

Institute of Applied Data Analytics (IADA)
Potential Role:
Predictive modelling for chronic disease and mortality
Smart dashboard systems for ageing surveillance

(C) Other Higher Institutions in Brunei

Universiti Teknologi Brunei (UTB)
Strengths: Engineering, ICT, creative industries, sustainability
Research & Education Contributions:
Development of smart ageing technologies, fall detection, and home safety sensors
Design thinking and UI/UX for elder-friendly apps and telehealth interfaces
Engineering solutions for transport, mobility aids, and accessible built environments
Collaborations with UBD on robotics and ageing-in-place infrastructure
Age-friendly design education in architecture and product design programmes

Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA)
Strengths: Islamic studies, Shariah, Islamic finance, halal science
Research & Education Contributions:
Islamic ethical perspectives on caregiving, end-of-life care, and dementia
Waqf and zakat financing models for long-term care services
Islamic palliative care training modules
Ageing and intergenerational solidarity in Islamic jurisprudence
Public education materials on ageing and health from an Islamic worldview

Politeknik Brunei
Strengths: Health sciences, business, ICT, engineering technology
Research & Education Contributions:
Applied research on elder support services (e.g. caregiving, nutrition, rehabilitation)
Development of vocational geriatric care training modules
Involvement in community screening and service-learning programmes
Training eldercare assistants and home health aides
Creating digital solutions with a user-first approach for the elderly

Institute of Brunei Technical Education (IBTE)
Strengths: Technical and vocational education (TVET)
Research & Education Contributions:
TVET courses in aged care, health support, and mobility assistance
Upskilling caregivers with micro-credentials in home care and dementia support
Integration of healthy ageing modules in hospitality, food services, and construction
Apprenticeships with NGOs or government-run aged care pilot projects

Religious Teachers University College of Seri Begawan (KUPU SB)
Strengths: Religious education, da'wah, teacher training
Research & Education Contributions:
Intergenerational learning through religious education frameworks
Training teachers and community leaders on supporting spiritual needs of older people
Research on ageing and spirituality in Bruneian Muslim communities
Collaborations with UNISSA and UBD's SOASCIS on Islamic-based ageing ethics

(D) Government Ministries and Departments

Ministry of Health (MoH)
Health Services, Policy and Public Health Research
Research:
Geriatric syndromes (frailty, dementia, multimorbidity)
Long-term care models and palliative care
Age-related NCDs, preventive health strategies
Actions to evaluate:
National implementation of ICOPE
Uptake and outcomes of community-based screening
Health workforce training in geriatric competencies

Ministry of Transport and Infocommunications (MTIC)
Digital Inclusion and Mobility for Older Adults
Research:
Digital skills and device access among elderly
Transport barriers to health and social care
Actions to evaluate:
Accessibility of public transport infrastructure
Uptake of digital health and assistive tech
Elder-focused ICT initiatives

Prime Minister's Office (PMO)
Governance, Strategic Oversight and Coordination
Research:
Inter-ministerial coordination on healthy ageing
Policy coherence for population ageing
Actions to evaluate:
Establishment of a national ageing strategy body
Monitoring of Decade of Healthy Ageing progress
Whole-of-government ageing policy reviews

Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports (MCYS)
Active Ageing, Social Participation, and Community Support
Research:
Social isolation and mental wellbeing among older persons
Effectiveness of recreational and volunteer programs
Ageism and public attitudes
Actions to evaluate:
Participation rates in senior clubs and activities
Intergenerational programme impact
Community resilience through senior inclusion

Ministry of Development (MoD)
Age-Friendly Environments and Housing
Research:
Accessibility of public buildings and housing
Urban planning for age-inclusive communities
Actions to evaluate:
Implementation of universal design standards
Smart city integration for older populations
Transportation access and safety audits

Ministry of Defence (MINDEF)
Veteran Support and Emergency Preparedness
Research:
Ageing military personnel and post-retirement health
Disaster risk and older population vulnerability
Actions to evaluate:
Inclusion of older persons in civil defence planning
Veteran access to health and social services
Military medical readiness for aged care emergencies

Ministry of Energy
Ageing and Environmental Comfort
Research:
Energy access and affordability for vulnerable seniors
Climate resilience and energy-sensitive housing
Actions to evaluate:
Heatwave risk preparedness for older adults
Energy subsidy targeting and household comfort
Energy-efficient home retrofits for the elderly

Ministry of Education (MoE)
Lifelong Learning and Curriculum Reform
Research:
Lifelong learning uptake among older adults
School-based intergenerational education
Gerontology education in higher institutions
Actions to evaluate:
Inclusion of healthy ageing in national curriculum
Microcredentials for caregiving and health literacy
Collaboration with MoH on health education for ageing

Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism (MPRT)
Age-Inclusive Agriculture and Tourism
Research:
Older adults in agro-tourism and traditional food systems
Accessibility of tourism products and services
Actions to evaluate:
Inclusion of seniors in heritage tourism and culture
Community garden and food security projects
Development of age-friendly tourism certification

Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA)
Spiritual Care and Cultural Approaches to Ageing
Research:
Religious leaders' role in ageing and end-of-life support
Cultural views on ageing and death literacy
Actions to evaluate:
Integration of spiritual care in elder services
Engagement of religious leaders in caregiver support
Inclusion of ageing themes in religious education

Ministry of Finance and Economy (MoFE)
Social Protection and Ageing Economics
Research:
Fiscal impact of population ageing
Sustainability of pensions and social protection
Financial literacy among older adults
Actions to evaluate:
Coverage of social protection schemes
Financial burden of care on families
Age-sensitive budgeting practices

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)
Regional and Global Collaboration
Research:
ASEAN comparisons on ageing policy
Brunei's contribution to global ageing discourse
Actions to evaluate:
Participation in WHO/ASEAN ageing platforms
Bilateral projects on ageing research and care models
Knowledge exchange with other countries

Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA)
Local Governance and Community Resilience
Research:
Community support systems and elder watch
Role of village leaders in ageing support
Actions to evaluate:
Local government coordination of ageing services
Emergency preparedness for older populations
Fall prevention and home safety inspections

Figure A1. Illustrative extension of the whole-of-university framework to a whole-of-nation approach for integrating ageing in Brunei Darussalam.

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