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## SPECIAL REPORT

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### Tokamachi, Niigata, Japan Experience Sharing on Preparation Towards Active Ageing, 2020

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As the year 2020 marked a significant milestone to our country with regards to our vision to become a developed country, the UKM-Niigata University “Exchange Program & Seminar on Program for Enhancing Health Policies for Healthy and Active Aging In-Comparison Between Malaysia & Japan” was suitably conducted. The MOU between UKM-NU (Niigata University) since year 2009 has opened plenty of opportunities for various fruitful collaborations in terms of knowledge, research and experience sharing between both countries. This round, the opportunity was offered to two post graduate DrPH (Doctor of Public Health) students, together with professors, associate professors and senior officers from Department of Community Health, Faculty of Medicine UKM, Faculty of Medicine & Health Sciences UMS and UPM, MyAgeing UPM and Cheras District Health Office. The Malaysian delegation was led by Associate Professor Dr. Mohd Rohaizat bin Hassan.

The exchange program aims to provide a platform for thorough and in-depth, mature discussions from key personnel and stakeholders in Japan and Malaysia; and further enhanced by four interesting visits, to two day-care centres and two community facilities in the town of Tokamachi. The program climaxed on 4<sup>th</sup> of February 2020, where a total of 12 representatives from Malaysia and 18 representatives from Japan attended the round table discussion on the preparation for active ageing. Japan delegates shared their experience, a case study of Tokamachi to the Malaysian delegates. The discussion put forth insightful thoughts for the

situation and challenges specific to each country. These representatives comprised of high officials such as the Special Advisor to the President for Healthcare and Long Term Care Policy, Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), Indonesia; Assistant Director, Office of Global Health Cooperation, International Affairs Division; Minister’s Secretariat, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Japan; Technical Officer, World Health Organization Centre for Health Development, Kobe, Japan; WHO Representative Office for Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam and Singapore; Director General, Japan Agency for Gerontological Evaluation Study (JAGES); Managing Director and Chief Program Officer, Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE); Program Associate, Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) and Professor, Faculty of Human Life Studies, Niigata University, Japan. The round table discussion was organized by Professor Yugo Shobugawa from the Department of Active Ageing, Niigata University (donated by Tokamachi City, Niigata Japan), Niigata University Graduate School of Medical and Dental Sciences, Niigata, Japan.

The Tokamachi city recorded a rapid rise of ageing population aged beyond 65 years old from 21.3% in year 2012 to near 40% in year 2020. This initiative is unique to the city of Tokamachi and does speak a lot about the honorable Mayor of Tokamachi city. The advancement stems from the effort of JAGES, a group of private researchers who took the effort to analyse data from household surveys, particularly the sociodemographic data of

the city. When these researchers presented analysis to the Mayor, his team took immediate preparative and adaptive actions to manage the rising issues faced by the citizens of Tokamachi city. Various efforts such as building community halls for the elderly to carry out physical and social activities, including foot exercise at the gymnastic center, and Hidamari swimming pool for aquatic exercise; engaging with Niigata University, founding the Department of Active Ageing in Niigata University, improving transport system and living environment of the Tokamachi Prefecture has been done since then. These strategies have met effective outcome, which successfully reduced the burden (monetary & human resource) on long term care of housebound elderly. An interesting question is that “Is the elderly being viewed as an asset or a burden?”. Tokamachi’s Mayor viewed them as the invaluable

asset to the city, because these elderly group of citizens continue to contribute to the city’s economy and social development. The initiative speaks more than the motivation of self-gain, reputation or mere cost saving, but a realization of the definition of health by the World Health Organization, that is, “health is the well-being of physical, mental, social and spiritual of an individual, not just with the mere absence of disease.” This has been a successful story of multi-stakeholders collaboration utilizing the evidence of research (translational research approach), with effective uptake from the authoritative figure with high level of awareness and responsibility of care, further supported by a sustainable funding system from the long term care insurance scheme. The contributors to this scheme contributed from all netizens, and a transparent data sharing system.



**Figure 1** Group photo for round table discussion on preparation towards active ageing

As a reflection from the exchange program, we asked ourselves, what is (are) the barriers to the implementation of the “Tokamachi approach” in preparation for active ageing in Malaysia? How do we remove the obstacles to certain issues such data access, sharing, and usage in our country? How to enhance the collaboration between multi-sectorial stakeholders? How to enable a sustainable long-term care funding model in Malaysia? Is long term care insurance the only answer? How to incorporate cultural elements that addressed the social, mental and spiritual domains in the day care centres in a multi-racial and multicultural country like Malaysia? These distal health determinants from the exo-environment of health should be revised to reduce the resistance to our efforts.

The beauty of Tokamachi city stayed in the memory of the Malaysian delegates as a calm, snowing city clothed in a thick blanket of snow, where 2.5 million of population reside (more accurately, 1 million of elderly). Despite of the challenges of climate change and recent tsunami in year 2011, the city welcomed us with warm hospitality, despite the shower of snowflakes since the day of our arrival! In this snowing city, where the temperature may reach -4 degree Celcius, our hearts remained warm and comforted by our Japanese friends in their graceful and respective manner towards us. This short 8 days visit from 1<sup>st</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> February 2020 further strengthened the collaboration between UKM-NU-Tokamachi, elevating the knowledge and experience sharing to a

## Japan Preparation towards Active Ageing

new level. We hope to spark off many innovative efforts to pivot our country's healthcare policy and initiatives on active ageing in the future. It is our

sincere wish that UKM will continue to support this activity.



**Figure 2** Exchange of souvenirs by the mayor of Tokamachi City of Niigata Japan, Mr Sekiguchi and Assoc Prof Dr Mohd Rohaizat



**Figure 3** Commemorate photo with Tokamachi City of Niigata Japan, Mr Sekiguchi, Professor Yugo Shobugawa, Assistant Professor, Yuki Shirakura, Wong Chin Mun & Diana Safraa Selimin