Projection and trajectories of cognitive ageing among older persons in Thailand: Role of education

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Abstract:

Majority of the population of the world is ageing including that of Thailand. In 2020, the proportion of older population aged 60 years and over in Thailand is at 19 per cent and by 2050, this proportion will become 35 per cent. This increase in the number of older people is much pronounced among those who are old-old (70-79 years old) and the oldest-old (80 years old and over). Such longer life expectancies are being gained but this coincides with the probability that older persons will have functional disabilities due to advanced age. It has been observed in recent years that the prevalence of cognitive diseases and impairments is increasing in many societies including Thailand.

This research examines the role of education on cognitive ability among the older population of Thailand. The nationally-representative data primarily utilised in this thesis is 2016 Population Change and Well-being in the Context of Aging Society. Multiple analytic approaches had been applied to this study to show various effects of education gradients on cognitive functioning.

In the first study, education and other covariates including income, health status, living arrangement, and social participation among others had been analysed by gender to test if the significant factors would be similar. It was observed that education and income are the only determinants consistently associated among genders with cognition. For the second study, the prevalence of ill health including lower cognitive performance were estimated. Two sets of models were created for the said estimations with one controlling for age and sex and the other controlling for age, sex, and education levels. These estimates were then applied to current and projected populations and what was observed was the prevalence of ill health was significantly lower when education level is integrated into the models. The functional limitations and dependency of older persons is lower when older people have higher levels of education. In the final study within this thesis, the characteristics approach is used to analyse the differences on the speed of cognitive ageing by education levels. The general observation among genders is that there is about a 10-year advantage in cognitive performance for those with higher than primary level of education compared with those who have lower than primary level. Comparing the trajectory of cognitive ageing, women with primary education and higher than primary education levels experience slower declines as they age compared with men with the same education levels.

This study finds through multiple methods of analyses that higher education levels are positively associated with higher cognitive abilities among older persons. Because of the gradients on cognitive health brought by education levels, it has to be ensured that inequalities in accessing education is addressed.