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Growth and resilience during COVID-19: Research on the impact of the pandemic on older adults in Singapore

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Research on the impact of the pandemic on older adults in Singapore

Growth and Resilience During COVID-19



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**CENTRE FOR
RESEARCH ON
SUCCESSFUL AGEING**

This report is the first instalment of a series of annual reports published by the Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (ROSA). The purpose of this series is to outline the yearly advancements made by ROSA in the research being conducted on the well-being of older adults in Singapore.

We would like to thank The Ngee Ann Kongsi for their generous support and contribution towards ROSA, enabling us to produce this series of reports for dissemination to the public and key stakeholders.

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Introduction

It has been a year since the Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (ROSA) was established in place of the Centre for Research on the Economics of Ageing (CREA). While it was a year full of challenges (least of all the COVID-19 pandemic), the team at ROSA adapted and worked hard to overcome these challenges, and we are grateful for the opportunity to share this annual report that presents a snapshot into the centre's work to better understand the 'ageing Singaporean'. Much of the work that has been done in the first year has been focused on establishing a good foundation, both on an organizational and academic front, that would enable the team to better study the 'ageing Singaporean' in the years to come. That being said, on an academic front, the team was also able to generate insights into older adult well-being during the pandemic using data from the SLP. This report will thus cover how the centre has advanced in both areas to better understand ageing in Singapore, and also present findings on the 'ageing Singaporean' during COVID-19.

On the organizational front, the team has been pursuing various partnerships within the ageing research sector in Singapore that will enable ROSA to both establish itself as a key resource in the ageing research landscape, as well as enable the team to further develop ROSA's capabilities as a research centre by tapping on the expertise of other ageing research experts in the field. This is an important step for the centre to take towards studying ageing in Singapore as it allows the team to develop new and novel areas of research within the topic of successful ageing. This is best illustrated by the academic developments at ROSA resulting from these partnerships, particularly the fielding of new modules exploring various key aspects of ageing in Singapore, thereby enhancing ROSA's arsenal of ageing related data and hence the team's ability to better understand ageing in Singapore. These new modules serve as key, foundational areas of study for the centre as we endeavour to better understand the 'ageing Singaporean', and the partnerships that enabled these modules will be discussed in greater detail in the first section of this annual report.

Also on the academic front, given the gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has impacted the world, the Centre's research for the first year has focused predominantly on the pandemic and understanding how the 'ageing Singaporean' was affected so as to be able to provide policymakers with insightful recommendations to ensure older adult well-being during this trying time. Research on the topic spanned the four quadrants of well-being that are of focus in ROSA's work (economic, physical, psychological, and social), and key findings in each quadrant will be presented in the second section of this annual report.

Overall, we hope that this report will give you a good idea of the work that has been carried out at ROSA to understand the 'ageing Singaporean' over our first year, as well as provide you with some insights into the directions in which the work at ROSA will move in the coming years. We are immensely grateful for the hard work that has been done by the team at ROSA to adapt to the challenges presented by the pandemic, without which we would not have been able to achieve so much in just our first year of running. Thus, we hope that this report will also provide you with an appreciation for the tremendous efforts made by the team.



Organizational Developments

The Ngee Ann Kongsi has provided integral financial support for ROSA, enabling the team to recruit a fresh group of pre-retirement age respondents, expand on the areas we conduct research on, and to forge strategic partnerships with organisations that have similar goals of advancing the well-being of older adults in Singapore.

Sample Refresh

The panel refresh recruitment started in June 2021 and a pilot group of 482 households were invited to self-enroll into the study. These households were identified by a Department of Statistics Sample as having at least one person between the ages of 50-55 living within that household. Due to the prevailing COVID-19 restrictions, the team was not able to follow up with house-to-house visits to personally guide the potential eligible respondents to sign up. However, provisions were made for respondents to call the centre's hotline, email or send text messages to the centre's staff for assistance. Depending on the response rates from this pilot, the team will send out subsequent invites to more households, such that a final group of 2000 respondents are recruited into the study.

The refresh is an important development that would enable ROSA researchers to better understand the 'ageing Singaporean'. By including a younger cohort and therefore providing a wider age-range for the sample, researchers are more able to study cohort differences in various indicators and determinants of well-being. This is especially important, for instance, when attempting to understand how factors shaping well-being may vary in importance between older adults in pre- and post-retirement stages of their lives. An example of this would be looking at how the extent to which older adults are financially prepared for retirement in the years leading up to it may impact their well-being post-retirement. Thus, the ROSA team is extremely grateful for the opportunity to expand the SLP sample and hence gain more insight into the 'ageing Singaporean'.



ROSA Partnerships

It is also vital for ROSA to build a network where we are able to share our expertise and findings with partners in the ageing sphere. This allows ROSA's translational research to have more impact as some of these partners can effect change and implement suitable interventions for their target groups, as well as enables the team to tap on the various expertise of researchers in these organizations to better inform the centre's research.

Here are some examples of the partnerships ROSA has explored in the past year:

National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC)

The main focus of this collaboration was on re-thinking volunteerism and the future of work for older adults in Singapore. In reimagining volunteerism, ideas such as promoting other-centeredness beneficial to one's well-being, looking at different types of volunteering for different life stages and having enablers in the work-space to cultivate a culture of volunteering were proposed. To better understand how older adults think and feel about volunteering, ROSA fielded a series of questions in February 2021 to provide the evidence that could help formulate the policies encouraging more volunteerism and how volunteering can be an important aspect in advancing older adults' well-being.



Agency For Integrated Care (AIC)

ROSA's partnership with AIC similarly focused on the subject of volunteerism among older adults. Both AIC and NVPC provided the ROSA team with on-the-ground insights and expertise on volunteerism which were extremely valuable for the development of the volunteerism module. Particular to AIC, their interest in volunteerism among older adults stemmed from the interest in uncovering whether volunteerism can act as a bridge which maintains social connections as seniors move into retirement. Other topics of interest that ROSA is considering exploring with AIC include (1) identifying the factors associated with mature Singaporeans' purchasing of long-term care insurance, and (2) exploring the social and health factors that contribute to successful ageing. Overall, AIC has provided the team with much insight into the practical issues that older adults face, and the collaboration thus far has been a fruitful one.



Geriatric Education & Research Institute (GERI)

To augment the team's capabilities in studying physical health and the effects of health on well-being, the team consulted researchers from GERI on instruments that they had already developed to study frailty and intrinsic capacity of older adults in Singapore. These two concepts represent key dimensions of physical health and will be expounded on in the later sections of this report. The collaboration between physicians at GERI and social sciences researchers at ROSA can help develop new knowledge on the holistic assessment of physical and mental health in the longer term.



Health Promotion Board

Another area that the ROSA team intends to pursue is to have objective data on physical activity and nutrition that can supplement the self-reported health status provided by our SLP respondents. Such data will help to elucidate the conditions of our respondents' physical well-being, as purely subjective assessments are limited especially when it comes to physical health. After early discussions with HPB, ROSA is keen to get SLP members to consent to an application developed by HPB called Health Insights Singapore (hiSG) so that we can better understand the levels of physical activity members have, the food intake they consume and how that can contribute to their overall well-being.

Besides these external partnerships, the ROSA team comprises of researchers from Duke-NUS and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP). The researchers work closely with one another across disciplines to help field new modules that can provide greater insights into the lives of older Singaporeans.

Research Developments

New Modules

As mentioned, the key motivation for ROSA to seek partnerships with the aforementioned organizations was to be able to work together with them to develop new areas of study to be introduced to the SLP and ROSA. These new areas are key factors in understanding the 'ageing Singaporean', and are part of ROSA's efforts to lay a foundational framework for the study of ageing in Singapore. In the first year, these partnerships have resulted in the inclusion of several modules that are outlined in this section.

Volunteerism

The volunteerism module was developed by the ROSA team in collaboration with researchers at NVPC and AIC. Volunteerism among older adults has been observed to benefit mental well-being, for instance, by providing older adults with a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Additionally, encouraging older adults to volunteer has also been argued to be a key strategy in developing a sustainable model for ageing in Singapore, as it is a means for society to tap on the valuable resources of older adults who may no longer be active in their occupations. Thus, volunteerism provides older adults with a key opportunity to continue contributing to society, even in retirement, benefitting both older adults themselves and society at large.

As such, it was imperative that ROSA, in the aim of enabling successful ageing, should study volunteerism trends in order to identify ways in which organizations such as NVPC and AIC can encourage more older adults to volunteer.

Additionally, by studying such trends, the ROSA team will also be able to study how volunteerism may impact well-being among older adults and hence lend credence to initiatives driving senior

volunteerism. The module represents a significant step for ROSA in expanding the scope of study for the centre, moving beyond purely economic factors to psycho-social factors as well.

Frailty and Intrinsic Capacity

Physical health in the form of chronic conditions and other physical ailments that might affect an older adult's ability to function and participate in daily life is another primary factor in determining the subjective well-being of individuals in older age. Previous research has observed that physical health is a determinant of all other dimensions of well-being for older adults – for instance, older adults who are bedridden are unable to participate in social activities as often and as such, experience declines in mental well-being due to the social isolation.

As such, when ROSA took over the SLP, there was a strong desire to strengthen the SLP's measures of physical health and to lay the foundation for a better understanding of this important aspect of ageing in Singapore.

Thus, as mentioned, the ROSA team developed a module in collaboration with GERI at NUS investigating two primary components of physical health, in particular, frailty and intrinsic capacity. Briefly put, frailty measures the extent of vulnerability to ageing-related physical decline that an older adult has, and intrinsic capacity measures the individual's overall physical health at the point in time, using various measures such as the distance that the individual walks on average in a day, for instance.

Similarly, with this module, the team at ROSA will be able to better identify both the factors that shape physical health among older adults by analyzing the data collected in this particular

module in conjunction with data collected from other existing modules, as well as the implications that having poor physical health might have on other aspects of well-being. Frailty and Intrinsic Capacity are often conceptualized as resources that help older adults cope with negative shocks during later life, and the measures will be used to construct indices of frailty and intrinsic capacity. The inclusion of these topics was thus integral in enabling researchers to gain insight into the 'ageing Singaporean', and the ROSA team is confident that significant findings will be able to be made with the additional module.

Caregiving

Caregiving is yet another important factor shaping the well-being of older adults as they age. One of the key concerns regarding an ageing population, especially with the generation of older adults in the SLP sample aged 55-75, is the fact that many of them are part of the 'sandwiched generation', having to care and provide for both their ageing parents and their children at the same time.

This potentially places a tremendous amount of stress on these individuals due to the demands of caregiving, often referred to as the 'caregiving burden'.



Thus, the caregiving module was one of the first new modules that was introduced to the SLP when ROSA began, developed in collaboration with The Centre of Ageing Research in the Environment (CARE) and Duke-NUS. The caregiving module sought to understand trends in caregiving among the SLP, for instance how many respondents are caregivers, the types of care that they provide, as well as which demographic groups are most likely to be caregivers.

Additionally, the caregiving module also sought to understand how caregiving impacted the lives of caregivers, for instance in terms of how much time they devote in a week to caregiving. Such insights into the demands of caregiving among older adults are critical in enabling the development of impactful and effecting interventions that will help reduce the caregiving burden for older adults, primarily by identifying the 'gaps' or the areas of greatest need for caregivers.

Other New Modules Included

On top of the new modules developed in collaboration with various stakeholders in the ageing research landscape, the ROSA team of researchers also worked hard to include new modules that are of great importance to understanding the 'ageing Singaporean'.

Religiosity

In collaboration with members of ROSA from the Institute of Policy Studies at NUS, a module examining the religiosity of older adults was included in the SLP in December 2020.

Religiosity or spirituality is commonly conceptualized both as a component of an individual's well-being (i.e the 'spiritual health' of an individual is considered to be an indicator of one's overall well-being), as well as a factor that determines other dimensions of well-being for individuals, and most studies have found that more religious persons generally have higher

levels of well-being. It is often analyzed in two dimensions, the first having to do with more organizational or behavioral aspects, and the second having to do more with internal aspects such as belief. Both of these aspects can contribute to well-being in different ways.

For instance, membership in a particular religious community can give individuals access to certain resources such as social support that help improve well-being. Alternatively, spiritual beliefs can also provide individuals with a sense of purpose as well as the emotional resources to cope with stressors in their lives, thereby improving mental well-being. Instead, it is the quality of couple's marriage which is fundamental to the strong association between marriage and well-being

The module fielded thus examined the extent to which SLP members were religious (i.e, their 'religiosity') across various dimensions, ranging from their frequency of participation in spiritual activities to the extent to which they felt spiritually connected to their religion or deity. The data is currently being analyzed to make better sense of how different dimensions of religiosity may impact well-being, and hence the precise mechanisms through which religiosity may shape well-being.

Doing so enables ROSA researchers to make appropriate recommendations to policymakers on how to best tap on the importance of religiosity in shaping older adult well-being.

Marital Satisfaction

Also fielded in December 2020 was the marital satisfaction module. Marital relationships are widely recognized as a key contextual component of late life development, and being in a satisfying marriage is often observed to have a positive effect on individual health and well-being, particularly for older adults with shrinking social circles. Importantly, however, it is not being married itself that confers these benefits, but the quality of the marriage - in other words, one's satisfaction with their marriage.

Thus, as a reflection of the quality of a marriage, the marital satisfaction module provides ROSA researchers with greater insight into the quality of SLP members' intimate social lives and clarity into its relationship to well-being. Further understanding into the factors that underpin a happy marriage and the mechanisms through which well-being is influenced by marital satisfaction would be an important endeavor to identify extant gaps and better inform policy makers on possible means to improve the well-being of older adults.

Social Networks

Finally, the ROSA team also included a social networks module in the SLP. The module was a deep-dive – a thorough examination intended to provide researchers with a better understanding of what the SLP participants' social networks consist of. This included, for instance, finding out how many individuals the respondent might consider their close friends, as well as various demographic variables on the contacts that the respondent lists. This enables researchers to understand, for instance, how diverse the social networks of the SLP members are, or the amount of social capital (resources that one might be able to gain through one's social network, for instance information about job openings or even money) that the SLP members possess.

Such factors have been shown to impact an individual's well-being, particularly for older adults. For instance, social isolation is a critical factor in determining well-being – many socially isolated older adults often have significantly lower levels of well-being – and having a strong social network is crucial in preventing social isolation. Thus, understanding the factors that contribute to a more extensive social network among older adults will go a long way in informing policies attempting to address the challenge of social isolation among older adults.

Conclusion

Overall, the development and subsequent inclusion of the new modules represents, on the one hand, the conscious effort that the ROSA team has made to shift away from looking exclusively at economic dimensions of well-being, and expanding the scope of research at the centre to include physical, psychological, and social dimensions of well-being as well. On the other hand, it also represents the centre's concerted efforts to lay a strong foundation for the study of the 'ageing Singaporean' through the inclusion of several key areas of study that are integral in understanding successful ageing.

As ROSA progresses into its second year, these additional dimensions will be bolstered and new modules will be developed to be included in the SLP. One example of the planned additions to the SLP that we have in mind is the aforementioned collaboration with HPB that will greatly enhance the physical well-being measures in the SLP. Such additions are integral to achieving a holistic view of the well-being of older adults in Singapore and thereby allow us to gain better insight into the 'ageing Singaporean'.

The 'Ageing Singaporean' in The Time of COVID-19



While much of the centre's efforts in the first year was targeted at establishing a good foundation for the centre to study the 'ageing Singaporean' through developing partnerships and including new areas of study, the centre did also generate interesting findings regarding the 'ageing Singaporean' during the pandemic. This ranged from understanding how the well-being (both overall and within specific domains of well-being) of the 'ageing Singaporean' was faring during the pandemic, to identifying the factors that might have exacerbated the negative effect of the pandemic on the well-being of some, or in other cases the factors that might have enabled some to fare better than others during the pandemic. A brief summary of these findings are thus presented in this section to provide you with a snapshot of the 'ageing Singaporean' in the time of COVID-19.

Overall Well-being

To assess the overall well-being of SLP members, participants were asked to rate on a scale from one to five how often they felt satisfied with life overall. By asking participants for an overall life satisfaction rating, participants are allowed judge their quality of life according to their personal standards and considerations, and does not impose an assumption that each facet of life is equally and uniformly important to all individuals.

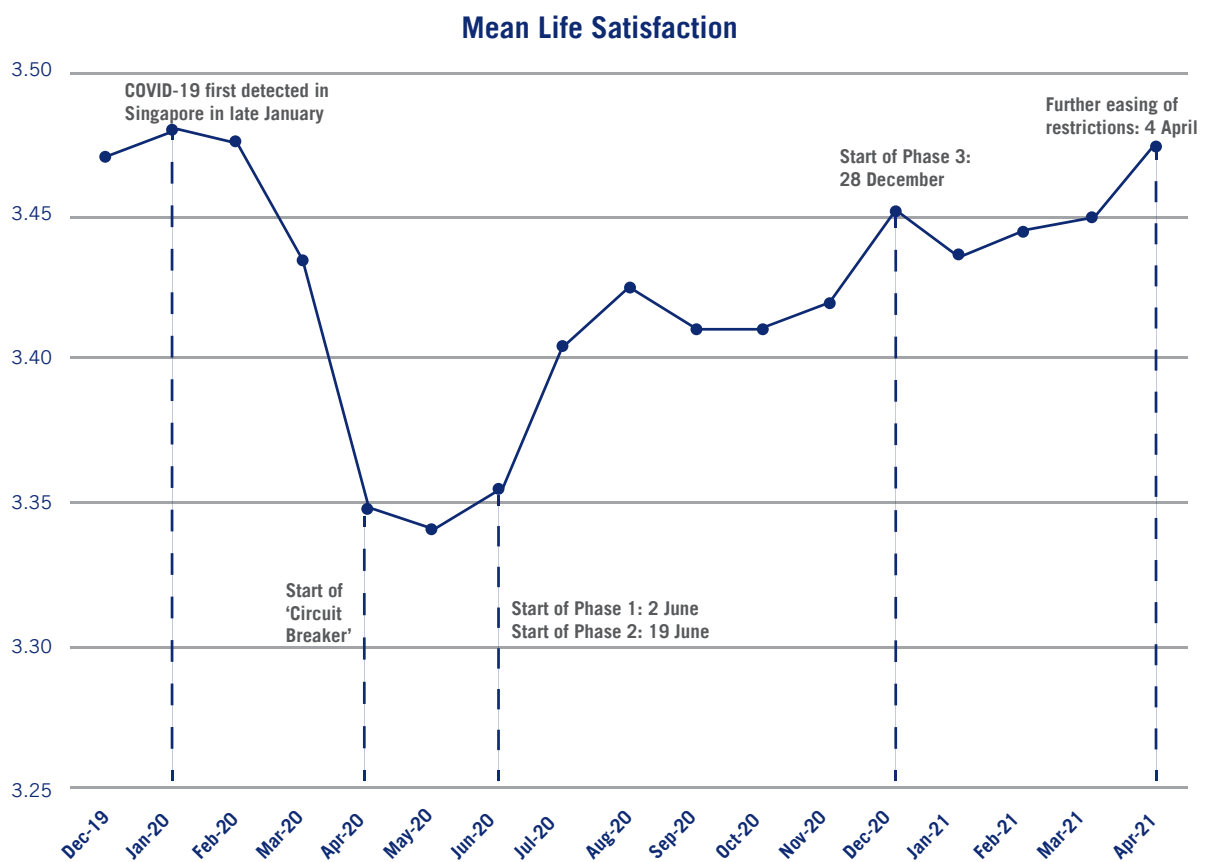


Figure 1 Longitudinal trend of average life satisfaction from December 2019 to April 2021

Figure 1 depicts the average overall life satisfaction from December 2019 to April 2021. From December 2019 to February 2020, well-being levels remained fairly stable, despite COVID-19 being first detected in Singapore in late January 2020. However, the rising number of local COVID-19 cases in the month of March 2020 and increasing restrictions on social activities, ultimately culminating in a two month lockdown, led to steep declines in the well-being of older adults. Evidently, the restrictions on everyday activities were certainly damaging to the well-being of older adults.

In May 2020, the average well-being of SLP members was at its lowest point since the monthly panel survey first started in August 2015. Reassuringly, the well-being of older Singaporeans significantly improved at the end of the lockdown. While life satisfaction remained fairly stable over the next three

months from August to November 2020, it significantly improved once again in December 2020, when it was announced that Singapore would ease restrictions and move into Phase 3 of its reopening. In April 2021, during which further easing of safety measures were in place, the well-being of older Singaporeans peaked at its 12 month high, and reached levels similar to that pre-COVID-19.

The responsiveness of older Singaporeans' well-being to the changes in the restrictiveness of COVID-19 safety management measures highlights how constraining activities within the community has wider impacts beyond that of the economy, but also on to the quality of life of everyday people, including that of older adults. While older adults are more vulnerable to a COVID-19 infection and the effort to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 remains crucial, the implications of such measures on the well-being of older adults must not be overlooked. In the following section, we take a deeper dive into the four main domains of older adult well-being and how COVID-19 has disparately impacted each of the four domains. In understanding the various mechanisms through which older adult well-being has been affected by COVID-19 and the measures to safeguard against it, ROSA researchers provide policy recommendations to how different aspects of older adults' well-being can also be ensured in light of a pandemic.

Economic Well-being

Economic well-being is primarily conceptualized as the access to economic resources and the capacity for these resources to contribute to an individual's needs and aspirations and ability to cope with the financial implications of risks, for instance health-care costs or the loss of income through unemployment or sudden onsets of unfortunate events such as the pandemic. A key indicator of economic well-being is consumption spending, otherwise defined as the amount spent by individuals or households on goods and services for personal use within a certain timeframe. High levels of consumption spending generally reflect better

economic health as it indicates, for instance, that individuals have greater amounts of disposable income, lower levels of debt, or greater confidence in the prospects for the economy.

In light of this, ROSA researchers hence looked into how consumption spending trends had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic as a means to better understand how the economic well-being of older adults had been affected.

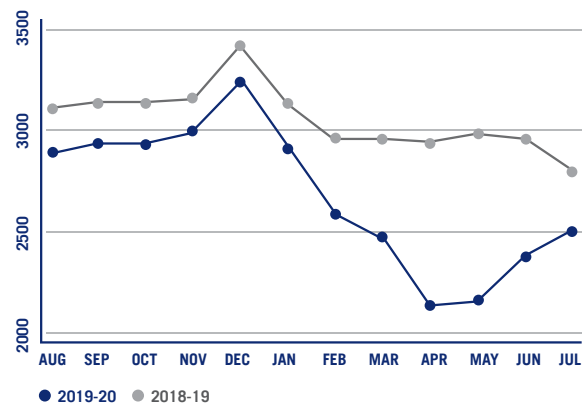


Figure 2: Trend of total household consumption spending (in SGD)

Figure 2 illustrates the trend in the average monthly household consumption over the year 2019-2020 as compared to the year 2018-2019. As can be seen, household consumption in 2020 dipped significantly when the pandemic began in the months of February and March 2020, especially when compared to the same time period from 2018-2019. While we do observe that in the months of June and July 2020 there was an uptick in monthly household consumption indicating some level of recovery in the economic well-being of respondents in the SLP, we do note that the levels of consumption had not yet recovered to pre-COVID levels as of yet.

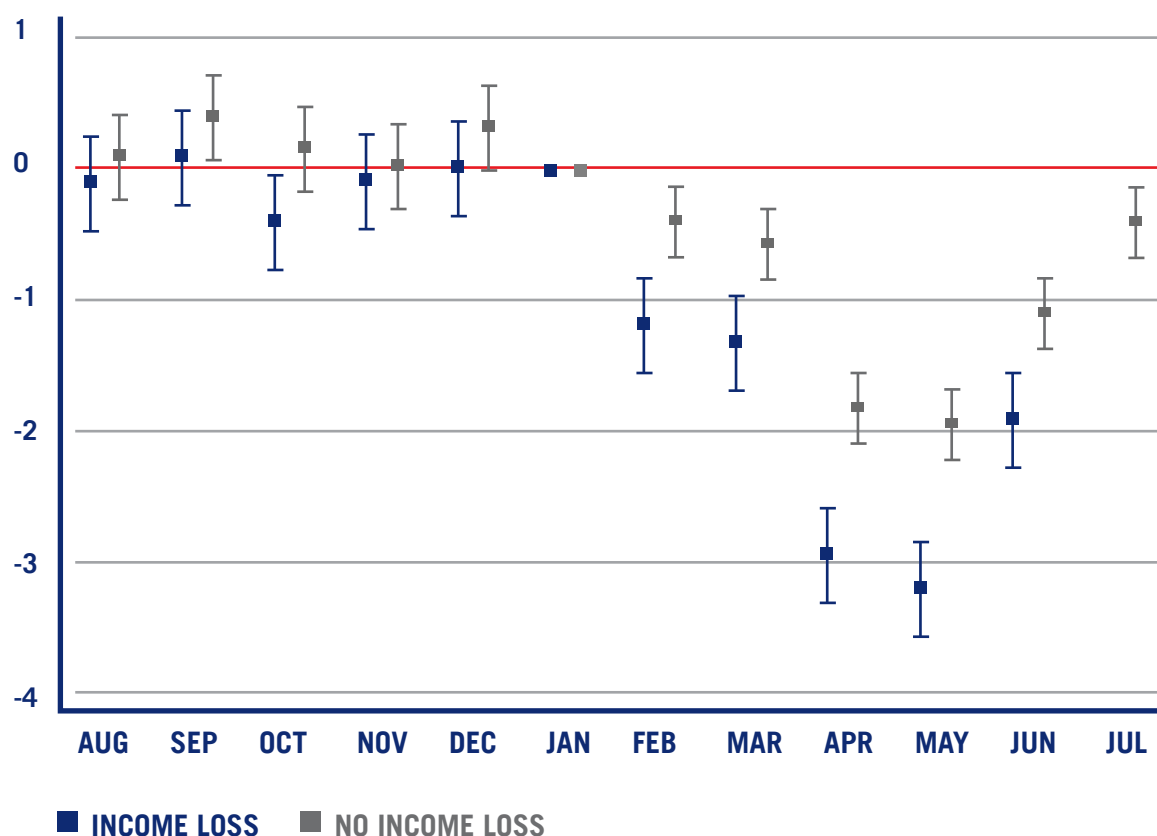


Figure 3: Total household consumption spending according to income status (income loss vs no income loss). Blue dots represent Difference in Difference estimates, and caps represent 95% confidence intervals. Change in consumption spending is measured according to percentage change. For instance, a -.1 value on the y-axis in the month of February indicates a 10% decrease in consumption spending for that month, relative to the average amount spent.

A deeper dive into the trends surrounding the drop in consumption spending among SLP respondents revealed that respondents who experienced a loss of income had a significantly steeper decline in consumption spending as compared to respondents who did not experience a loss of income (illustrated in Figure 3).

Based on these findings, ROSA researchers concluded that 33% of the aggregate consumption decline experienced by the SLP was likely explained by income losses during the pandemic. Researchers also found that, in general, SLP respondents reflected a rising perception of economic uncertainty in light of the pandemic and argued that the loss of confidence in the economy might also explain some of the decline in consumption spending. It was thus recommended that income support programs should be made available to those who experienced a loss of income so as to improve economic well-being among older adults, and that the government should also work to contain fear of the pandemic and to boost individuals' confidence in Singapore's economic outlook.

Box Story 1.

The 'Economic Resilience' of Older Adults

In terms of economic well-being, the older adults in the SLP did, indeed, face significant challenges due to losses of income. While the pandemic may have thus been daunting for most, the ROSA team also found that in the face of such challenges, many of the older adults in the SLP were incredibly resilient and found innovative ways to overcome these challenges. This surfaced during a series of qualitative focus groups that the centre conducted with SLP members to better understand their experiences with the pandemic, and thus enabled the team to gain a deeper understanding of the pandemic's impact on older adults.



Some respondents, for instance, noted that they made use of the 'downtime' to register for and attend various online courses made available during the pandemic. Mdm Tan (not her real name) for instance, shared that during the pandemic she started taking up courses offered by the government to improve her IT skills and to be able to adapt to trends in digitization.

Although she herself was semi-retired and only worked part-time, she felt appreciative of the many training opportunities that were made available during the pandemic, and that people should take the opportunity to improve their skill sets during the economic downturn.

Other respondents took the opportunity to set up home businesses, selling different products that they either imported or produced themselves. These respondents tapped on the guidance of their children to utilize social media platforms through which they marketed their products, with one respondent, Mdm Amina (not her real name), even setting up her own website to market and sell her products.

Thus, while we do observe that older adults in the SLP faced declines in their economic well-being, we also importantly observe their 'economic resilience' and the enterprising character of older adults who develop innovative ways to overcome these declines.

Physical Well-being

A crucial aspect of ensuring the physical well-being of older adults is the provision of chronic care for those that are suffering from chronic ailments, as older adults have been shown to be more vulnerable to chronic conditions such as Alzheimer's, heart disease, or diabetes. In light of this, researchers examined the provision of formal chronic care for older adults by healthcare professionals, and how the provision of such care may have been affected by the pandemic.

The findings revealed that 58.7% of respondents with chronic conditions reported experiencing interruptions in chronic care. The two sites that experienced the greatest disruption were the Hospital Outpatient clinics, with 61.6% of respondents reporting experiencing disruptions at such clinics, and Polyclinics with 47.3% of respondents experiencing disruptions at such clinics (see Figure 4).

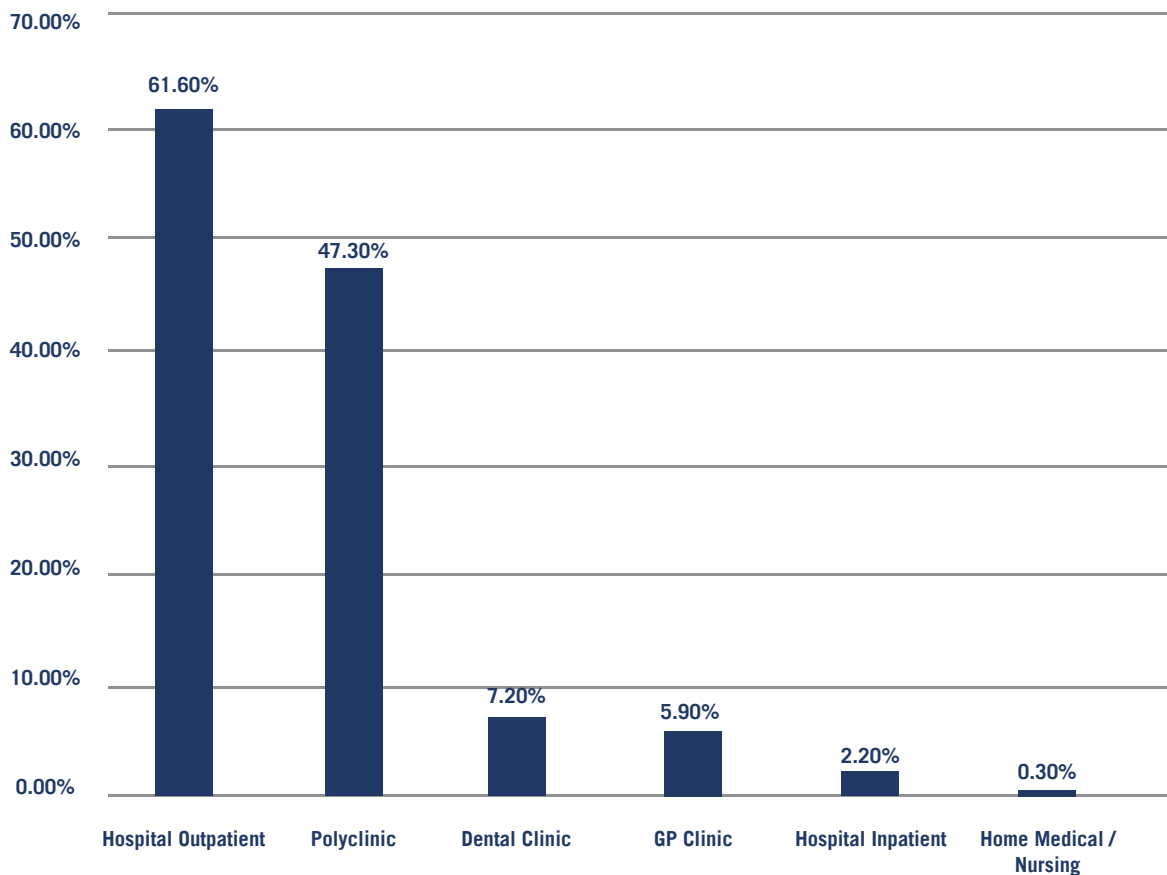


Figure 4: Proportion of respondents experiencing disruptions in chronic care at various sites.

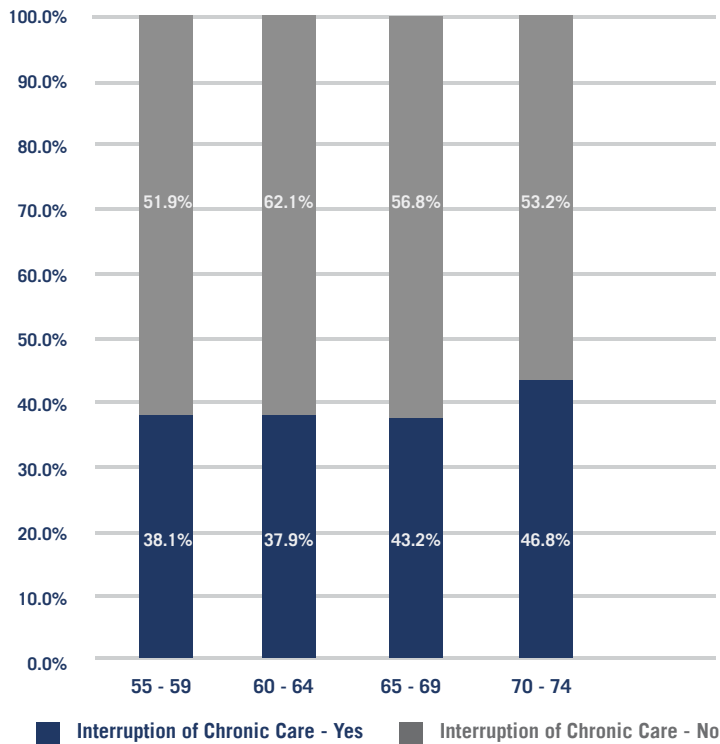


Figure 5: Proportion of respondents in each age group that experienced disruptions in the provision of chronic care.

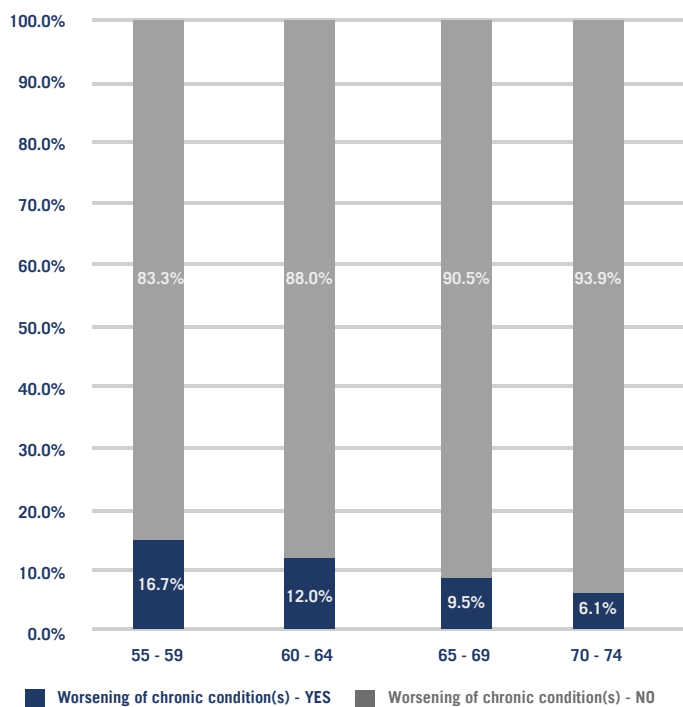


Figure 6: Proportion of respondents experiencing a worsening of chronic conditions during the pandemic.

In terms of who was experiencing more interruptions in the provision of chronic care, researchers found that older respondents were more likely to experience interruptions. As can be seen in Figure 5, a greater proportion of respondents aged 70-74 (46.8%) experienced interruptions as compared to younger respondents. However, while older respondents were the most likely to experience interruptions in the provision of chronic care, they were in fact the least likely to report experiencing a worsening of chronic conditions during the pandemic (see Figure 6).

Researchers thus established that the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the rates of healthcare utilization, especially pertaining to the provision of chronic care, thereby highlighting important considerations for the healthcare sector when anticipating further lockdowns. Researchers thus recommended that alternative modes of provision for health care should be made available that individuals would still be able to tap on even in the situation where a lockdown is declared, for instance telehealth and telemedicine.

Box Story 2.

Physical health during the pandemic – an outlier?

A seemingly perplexing trend that was observed in ROSA's initial analysis into the impact of the pandemic on the physical well-being of older adults was that, while a decline in the well-being of SLP members was observed across almost all domains of well-being, respondents' satisfaction with their health did not decline during the pandemic.

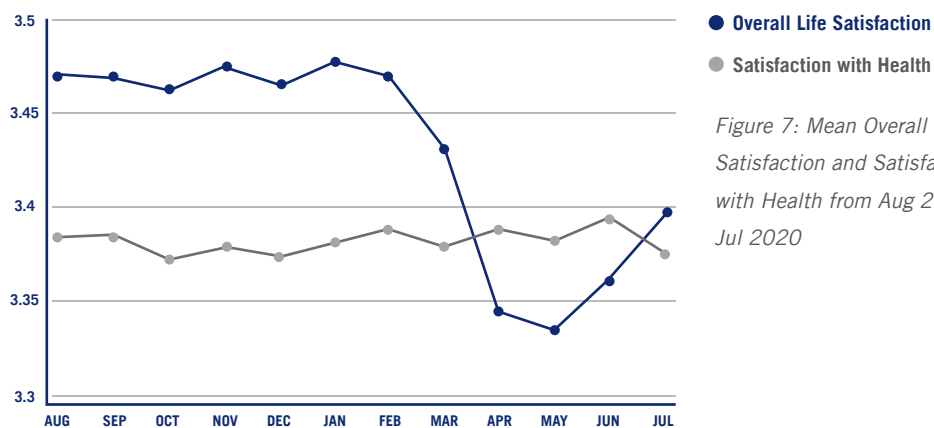


Figure 7: Mean Overall Life Satisfaction and Satisfaction with Health from Aug 2019 - Jul 2020

As can be seen from Figure 7, while overall life satisfaction declined significantly when the Circuit Breaker began in March 2020, satisfaction with health remained constant. This was despite, as discussed, interruptions in healthcare provision.

While this initially perplexed researchers, possible reasons for this peculiar trend were uncovered during the qualitative focus group discussions with SLP members. Interestingly, participants such as Mr Lim and Mr Tan (not their real names) who both have diabetes found that they were more able to keep to a regular exercise routine when work from home policies were implemented. For instance, Mr Lim stated that “after office hours I shut my computer and go for exercise and my health improved. I have a diabetic index of “7.4-7.5”, (but) daily walking brought it down to 6.6”. Thus, for Mr Lim, being able to finish work promptly, as well as being able to save on travelling time, enabled him to stick to a daily exercise routine that improved his health significantly.

Insights like this highlight several points. Firstly, while we may often think of the pandemic as a purely negative occurrence, it is also important for us to recognize that there are also lessons that can be learnt from it that may help shape society in ways that enable successful ageing. In this case, we observe that allowing older adults to strike a healthy work-life balance can have a significant impact on their physical well-being.

Secondly, we also observe the importance of qualitative perspectives on issues – while quantitative approaches are comprehensive and most widely applicable, it is important to also complement these approaches with qualitative perspectives at times to ‘fill in the gaps’ that may arise in our understanding of issues. As such, the team does hope to be able to continue conducting qualitative focus groups in the future to supplement the insights that are gained through the monthly surveys.

Psychological Well-being

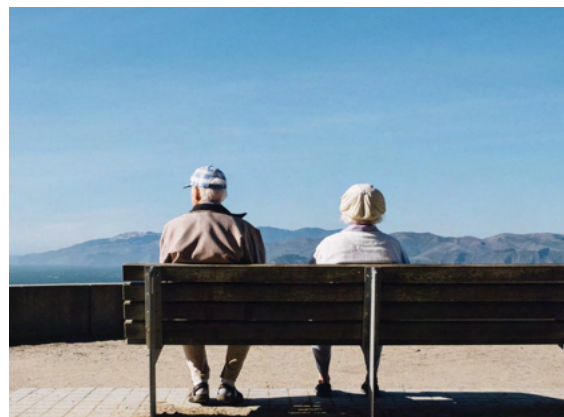
The COVID-19 pandemic has presented individuals with numerous challenges with regards to mental health. "Pandemic Fatigue", for instance, has been cited as a mental health issue by many experts, brought on by the prolonged nature of the pandemic as well as the many drastic changes that individuals have had to quickly adapt to. It has been described as a 'feeling of exhaustion from the changes that the pandemic has brought about, as well as feeling a sense of dread and irritation with the constant news of the pandemic'. It was critical then for ROSA researchers to attempt to identify various factors or points of intervention through which efforts can be made to improve the well-being among older adults.

In light of this, psychological resilience, defined as an individual's perceived ability to bounce back from stress, was a key point of interest for ROSA during the pandemic. It is commonly conceptualized as a mental resource that individuals can rely upon to overcome hurdles - a highly resilient individual would be able to cope with challenging situations, and have confidence in their ability to recover while an individual that is not as resilient may have difficulties taking on challenges and possibly allowing these challenges to affect them for an extended period. Researchers thus embarked to understand and identify the various factors that may affect the 'availability' of this resource, so as to be able to identify points of intervention that would improve or ensure for mental well-being during the pandemic.

SLP respondents were asked several questions assessing their level of resilience 3-4 months after the circuit breaker period. Those who experienced larger declines in well-being during the lockdown tended to report lower levels of resilience even though restrictions were relaxed in the subsequent months.

However, older adults who had satisfying social relationships tended to report higher levels of resilience. Most significantly, respondents' average level of social satisfaction in the year before the pandemic was the strongest predictor of resilience after the circuit breaker. This implies that individuals who enjoy stable and consistent social support are better able to maintain high levels of psychological resilience. This is over and above health and economic satisfaction—which also emerged as significant predictors. This finding highlights the importance of maintaining high levels of economic, health and especially social satisfaction over the long-run, in order to ensure that older adults remain psychologically resilient and are able to overcome the challenges that the pandemic presented for them.

Thus, ensuring that older adults maintain and preserve adequate support structures that are sustainable was found to be critical in ensuring the mental health of older adults. This is likely due to the fact that, while we may often assume otherwise, psychological resilience is not a personal matter, but is in fact likely to be aided by an individual's social support and contacts. Thus, ensuring that older adults remain socially connected and have adequate levels of social support were identified as key points of intervention to improve mental well-being among older adults during the pandemic, a point that was also highlighted when studying the social well-being of older adults covered in the next section.



Box Story 3.

How do we improve social support for older adults?

ROSA's findings with regards to the psychological and social well-being of older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic both highlight the importance of social networks and being socially integrated in improving and sustaining well-being. The question then, is how can we as a society encourage older adults to remain socially integrated?

One important clue for an effective intervention can perhaps be found in the different sources and kinds of social support that older adults relied on during the pandemic, a topic which was raised during the qualitative focus groups that were conducted. Participants shared that they relied on a wide variety of sources for social support – many, for instance, relied on their children and their family during the pandemic for help. 'Help' consisted of things like learning how to use food delivery apps or order groceries online, or even doing the grocery shopping for them, all in an effort to help them adapt to the safe-distancing measures.

However, relying on family for such help, while a valuable resource for most, is not always an option for all older adults, especially those who might not have a family to rely on or who may live on their own. In such cases (and again, more evidence of the incredibly resilient character of many older adults in Singapore), some participants turned to their neighbors for help.

Ms. Chan (not her real name), for instance, shared about the way she had set up an informal network with her neighbors whom she corresponded frequently with. During the circuit breaker, she relied on this network to make group purchases on online shopping platforms in order to save on delivery fees – as she was living alone, she often paid delivery fees for small orders prior to this, and felt that it was a waste of money.

Such narratives give us a much clearer picture of not just who older adults may rely on for social support, but also the different ways in which they do so. This allows ROSA researchers to better understand the needs of older adults, as well as the potential solutions to providing for their well-being in certain cases. In this particular instance, we see the importance of networks that we might not always think about (in this case neighbors) in ensuring that older adults' well-being is provided for. We also see the value of different initiatives such as group buying towards a similar end.

These insights thus lay the ground for the development of interventions that enable group buying initiatives and tap on neighborhood communities to ensure the social and psychological well-being of older adults, especially those that live alone.



Social Well-being

A key concern for the social well-being of older adults is that of social isolation. Unfortunately, a primary measure adopted to stop the spread of COVID-19 transmissions in Singapore was to limit the number of social interactions outside that of the household, thus exacerbating the problem of social isolation among older adults. While the stringency of these measures varied depending on the severity of local COVID-19 transmissions, its disruption to the social lives of older adults living alone was palpable.

Hence, a central point of interest within the focus of social well-being was to identify the groups of older Singaporeans who may be more vulnerable to the consequence of such measures and factors which may ameliorate its impact on their well-being to guide future policy.

As expected, findings suggested that older adults who lived alone experienced a sharper increase in their feelings of loneliness and a steeper decline in the overall life satisfaction, particularly in the months of April and May, during which the lockdown was being enforced. Further, these seniors are more likely to be older, with a lower household income and be in poorer health. In addressing this issue, researchers also identified two key factors which would effectively mitigate feelings of loneliness and improve well-being - firstly, greater participation in social activities, and secondly, more frequent use of digital communication. In short, these factors relate to ensuring the social integration of seniors in the community during periods where social interaction outside of the home is limited.

Equipping older adults with the skill sets to capitalize on digital communication empowers them to stay connected on their own terms, while curating more social activities and programs for seniors provides them with the opportunity to remain socially engaged with others in the community. Thus, researchers recommended that policy should continually build up on such schemes to ensure that relevant and accessible resources remain available to seniors in the effort to keep them socially active and safeguard their social well-being.



Conclusion



In sum, the ROSA team has been hard at work to help inform policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic that have strived to ensure for the well-being of older adults in Singapore. Several key themes emerged from the research conducted thus far, including the importance of technology in helping older adults adapt to the pandemic and the importance of social support and networks in helping older adults tide over the pandemic, and researchers will continue to explore how best to tap on such solutions to improve older adult well-being during these periods. Additionally, the findings were presented to government ministries and other relevant stakeholders in the various policy roundtables that have been held by ROSA since July last year, and the team has received much positive feedback for their contributions in this regard.



Looking Ahead at the Coming Years

The past year has very much been defined by, and for good reason, the COVID-19 pandemic. The unprecedented nature of the crisis and its effect on the well-being of older adults in Singapore made it paramount for ROSA researchers to study it in efforts to support policymakers in handling the unanticipated developments that came about as a result. We believe that the team made significant contributions to this end, and will certainly strive to continue doing so as the pandemic and its effect on our lives continues to persist.

That being said, as society adapts to the ‘new normal’ and as Singapore learns to treat COVID-19 as ‘endemic’ rather than a ‘pandemic’, the ROSA team plans to expand the scope of research on the ‘ageing Singaporean’ beyond pandemic related issues. Much work is already being done to this end, with researchers analyzing and studying the data obtained through the fielding of the newly included modules mentioned at the beginning of this report. Thus, in the coming months, you can certainly look forward to hearing about the research that the ROSA team has been conducting on other important aspects of ageing in Singapore.

ROSA will also continue seeking out partnerships that will further our understanding of ageing in various domains. In this first year, we had productive conversations with organisations that have shared their needs with the team and ROSA will work towards building a repository of data that can provide the evidence organisations require to formulate policies and/or interventions. With the generous financial support from the Ngee Ann Kongsi, ROSA was also able to start exploring, as mentioned, some areas of qualitative research, starting with focus group discussions with our SLP members to get deeper insights into various topics such as how COVID-19 have affected them. We are hopeful that we can strengthen our capabilities in our longitudinal dataset and analysis in the coming year, and work more closely with partners in the government ministries and organisations working with older adults.

About The Centre for Research On Successful Ageing (ROSA)

ROSA is a multidisciplinary research centre based in SMU. It was established with an MOE Tier 3 social sciences research grant, as well as the generous support of The Ngee Ann Kongsi. Research at ROSA seeks to define and measure a holistic construct of wellbeing and to identify the factors that impact Singaporeans' well-being as they progress through the later phases of life. Through close collaboration with government and other partner agencies, ROSA also aims to translate research insights into policy innovations that advance the well-being of older adults holistically and promote successful ageing in Singapore. ROSA brings together a diverse team of leading international and local researchers in ageing and age-related issues from various disciplines. Through empirical evidence derived from a longitudinal methodological approach, the multidisciplinary and multi-institutional research team advances propositions that promote successful ageing in Singapore.

For any additional comments or inquiries regarding this annual report, please email us at rosa@smu.edu.sg.



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The Ngee Ann Kongsi is a non-profit Teochew philanthropic organisation focused on educational, cultural and charitable activities in Singapore, while placing a deep emphasis on preserving the Teochew heritage. The organisation is an active advocate in education. It was founded in 1845 by Teochew immigrants from China to provide welfare services for its members, and was formally incorporated under the Ngee Ann Kongsi (Incorporation) Ordinance in 1933.



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