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Age-old name for an older-age habit

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Opsimathy: 'rare, 1656; Gr. ψέμανθάνω. Learning acquired late' (Shorter Oxford, 1972, p. 1455). The word itself might be rare and old – and figuratively Greek to a lot of people – but the art of opsimathy is a fashionable state of personal fulfilment these days, such is the global push for mature-age entry to university courses. At campuses worldwide, 70 is the new 45.

I had the pleasure of interviewing, for a research project, a group of Singaporean women well into their 50s and, until now, entirely unpractised in tertiary endeavour. Within Singapore's predominantly youthful society, men and women who have worked all their lives and concentrated on raising families and holding relatively unskilled jobs are known collectively (and not altogether unkindly) as 'uncles' and 'aunties'. They have been perceived as more intent on a game of mahjong than any pursuit remotely academic. Not so now. These 'aunties' were students on a Kaplan diploma course, and are even entertaining long-term ambitions for degree study with one of our university partners. They were doing this at an advanced stage of life, they told me, because – when they left school 40 years ago – they were expected simply to find modest employment. Study was not on the agenda.

Inspired by their children's achievements in this age of greater educational opportunity, though, they were determined to demonstrate – to their families and, perhaps even more importantly, to themselves – that they too have the capacity for academic success. As two of them explained:

Lecturing in Australia, I have encountered identical attitudes. The mature-age students (opsimaths all) arrive early, sit at the front of the theatre, take notes, ask questions, never flirt during class with Facebook, and unfailingly deliver their

I felt that my children are so smart, all at universities, so I thought I'd show them that I am smart too... I'm 56 and I want to learn something new and get more knowledge. I don't want to retire yet (Certificate Awards, 2014).

assignments in time. It's a healthy trend. In pursuing this later-life passion, they are following an example set by the Roman senator and historian Cato the Elder (234 BC – 149 BC), who decided to teach himself Greek when he turned 80.

The opsimath factor has been so strongly established at Simon Fraser University in Canada that its proponents formed an Opsimath Club – recently (and rather drearily) re-named the Seniors Lifelong Learners Society. Among its aims are 'fostering a feeling of fellowship among all senior students' and developing 'an input on courses' for the Simon Fraser 55+ program (Simon Fraser, 2018). In Australia, says the [Universities and Colleges Admissions Service](#) (2014), there has been a steady annual increase in application rates to university from people older than 21. This report also notes that 'around a third of UK-domiciled first degree entrants are mature students'.

In a much less serious vein, we find a variant of opsimathy on the British 'pub quiz night' scene. The Withington Quiz League, conducted in the Greater Manchester district, contains a team calling itself 'the Opsimaths'. Matches are held on Wednesday nights (WithQuiz, 2018). If I had followed in childhood my grandfather's patient, but unrewarded, instructions in the game, I might be able to present myself as a guest player for that team. My talent at throwing darts is pathetic, but I do at least have the academic and senescent credentials. I took a master's degree in my early 50s and completed a doctorate when I turned 60. That makes me just like Cato the Elder and the Singaporean 'non-aunties': an opsimath, and proud of it.

A few weeks ago as I was walking out of the building where those 'non-aunties' were taking their courses, I spotted this motivational message displayed on a Kaplan poster:

"Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at 20 or 80. Anyone who keeps learning is young." – Henry Ford (Lifelong Learning, 2018, p. 1)

I hope they saw it too – and henceforth saw themselves as omniscient opsimaths.

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