

SUBMISSION BY U3A CITY OF MELBOURNE INCORPORATED

UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE (U3A)

TO THE

STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGEING

The University of the Third Age (U3A) is an international organisation which embodies the scholarly principles of life-long education and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. . .

UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE (or U3A) is a collective title adopted internationally to connote groups of mature-age people who join together to share learning experience in a variety of fields and disciplines. Whilst there are common objectives shared by all U3A, each is an autonomous unit and there are broad differences of interest, structure and organisation, determined by the particular needs of each group and by the local resources available to meet these needs. This submission therefore relates only to U3A City of Melbourne Incorporated and does not purport to represent the views of other U3A.

U3A strongly supports the view expressed in *New Learning – A Charter for Education in Australia*, published by the Australian Council of Deans of Education, which states:

“---- that Learning will be Lifelong and Lifewide, acknowledges the greying of the population and the short shelflife of technological skills. In an era signified by rapid change, the need to promote autonomous learning is paramount – citizens must learn, throughout and across their lives. Lifewide learning recognises the need for much greater flexibility and diversity of educational experiences; learning should occur in parks, in pool halls, and outside of traditional institutions. Lifelong learning means that education for most does not end at school or university, but that adult and community education, in particular, is of growing importance. Learning opportunities must be available to those from all backgrounds, of all ages, and at all stages of life. To this end, a national framework for Lifelong Learning is imperative.”

U3A believes that it has a significant role to play in this framework, particularly in the sense that its programmes are structured on the concepts of both lifelong and lifewide learning. First, the range of courses and the levels at which they are pitched, offers choices for those who wish to further pursue earlier fields of study, as well as those who wish to explore and develop new fields of learning that may previously have been denied to them. Second, the learning is spread across a diversity of learning experiences and learning environments, including classes and workshops, forums with guest speakers, computer studies and visits to industries, galleries, theatre, concerts, places of cultural and national interest. Association with the RMIT University and the pursuit of areas of common interest with that institution significantly broadens this aspect.

In addition to the general programmes in the humanities and the sciences, there are those specifically related to quality of life, including nutrition, exercise, health and self-protection, and those designed to promote familiarity with technological change and its application to daily living. For example, in recent months, four forums have been conducted by guest experts in the fields of meteorology, communication and telephone technology, internet banking, and prescription drugs and alternative therapies. A comprehensive programme of computer studies and applications is progressing and members have participated in externally conducted internet courses.

City U3A Programmes

The courses on offer are many and varied across a wide range of disciplines and fields of interest. The main programme covers courses between mid-February and mid-December. These courses vary in length from a few weeks to a full year or even longer, depending on the interests and wishes of the course members and the availability of the tutor. Additional or repeat courses are arranged as necessary to meet members' requests. Aside from these regular courses, a summer programme of short general courses is offered in January/February each year.

Courses on offer include :

Languages and Literature (including Chinese, French, German, Indonesian, Japanese, Italian, Latin)
English Language and Literature (including Creative Writing Workshops and Cryptic Crosswords)
Drama, Opera, Australian literature, Biography, Art appreciation, Drawing, Painting, Antiques,
Music and Musical appreciation, U3A Choir, U3A Orchestra, Philosophy, Mythology, Meditation,
Mathematics, Science and Technology, Psychology, Communication, Biology, Health and Safety,
Anthropology, Aboriginal studies, Archaeology, Environmental studies, Geology, Fossils, Gemstones
History, Comparative religions, Ancient Civilisations, Current Affairs, Economics, Criminology,
Armchair Travel, Chess, Contract Bridge, Israeli & Multicultural Dancing, Exercise & Dance,
Self-protection, Town-planning issues. Computer studies (including software programmes & internet)

Importance is attached to corporate activities which, in addition to their interest content, enable members to meet fellow members from other courses. A sub-committee organises visits to industry and other places of interest and to theatre and concert performances. It also arranges expeditions, walks, gallery and museum visits and weekend excursions. Overseas tours are arranged as opportunity offers.

Regular luncheon forums are held, with guest speakers from various organisations and institutions, usually preceded by general meetings, at which members can exchange views and offer suggestions for courses or new activities or other matters concerning the organisation. A newsletter is published and mailed monthly to all members. This covers matters of general interest as well as information on current and forthcoming programmes and other activities.

U3A City of Melbourne

Each U3A must look to local community resources for accommodation available, either free of charge or at low cost, in which to conduct its activities. This may involve council or shire premises, church halls, schools or colleges or even private homes.

U3A City, with a current membership of around 700, is fortunate to have concluded an arrangement with RMIT University, enshrined in a Memorandum of Understanding, (copy

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attached). The arrangement is based on the University's commitment to the community in which it serves and its commitment to the principles of an educational framework of lifelong and lifewide learning. It recognises U3A as occupying a significant role as a partner in this framework.

The arrangement is of inestimable value to U3A. It provides an identification with a prestigious professional institution of learning, which is invaluable in terms of morale and motivation for U3A members. It also provides an infrastructure which it would be impossible for U3A to maintain by itself, including lecture rooms, extensive library and information resources, computer laboratory, and technical services (including audiovisual equipment, internet access and printing). Above all it provides day-to-day contact with staff and students and access to the wisdom and resources of a broad academic community. U3A and RMIT have identified a number of areas of common interest in which they can usefully cooperate and expect these to develop. RMIT's convenient location, in the heart of the city and readily accessible to public transport is, particularly beneficial, especially to those whose mobility is restricted.

U3A City receives some limited assistance from the State government to purchase some audio-visual and other teaching aids, but no other funding. City U3A holds the view that, given the advantages it derives from association with RMIT, it should be self-supporting to the greatest possible extent, so that it can retain independence and accountability only to its membership. Members currently pay an annual subscription of \$25 (or \$40 per couple). The annual subscription covers all courses and entitles members to attend courses at affiliated U3A, either free of charge or at nominal cost.

Distinguishing Features of U3A

The feature which distinguishes U3A from most other educational institutions is the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, rather than as a qualification or skill acquisition for gainful employment. Instead of following the prescribed and arbitrarily standardised courses offered by conventional educational institutions, U3A members may exercise choice in their fields of study and pursue these at a pace and to a depth consistent with individual ability and perceived individual and group needs. There are no entrance qualifications for membership or enrolment in courses, neither is any certificate or accreditation given on completion of a course

Second, U3A membership is extremely diverse and this contributes significantly to its success. Though the majority of members have retired and are therefore mainly of mature age, there are no age limits and the age range is as high as forty years. Members come from a wide range of backgrounds:

- educational – from primary to postgraduate qualifications
- vocational – a very wide spectrum including (as would be expected in this generation) a large number of “home duties”
- socio-economic – a broad sample including a significant number of pensioners
- cultural – extensively multicultural, with members from many countries
- widely varied life and work experience and interest patterns.

A third and critical feature of U3A is the self-determination and self-help principle, already mentioned.. The membership determines the fields and levels of learning activity and rigid distinctions between tutors and students, which characterise most

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conventional educational systems, are virtually non-existent; tutors are often students in other U3A courses. Those who participate in U3A do so on a voluntary basis. All of the administrative and office functions are performed voluntarily by members, providing a satisfying activity for those whose skill and experience lie in these directions.

Tutors

Volunteer tutors and other members identified as possessing potential as tutors are invited to submit proposals for courses. Committee members – several of whom are themselves active tutors, with past experience in tertiary and academic teaching - discuss the form, content and proposed length of the courses with the proposers, assuming a supportive rather than directive role and seeking to assist with material and other resources. Few courses or potential tutors have had to be rejected. Tutors meet together regularly to exchange views and to discuss problems and teaching techniques. There are at present about 70 tutors on the active list

Approaches are also made to non-members and organizations to conduct courses within their areas of expertise, including universities, government instrumentalities, and NGO's. A fruitful source, which is now under development, is to provide a forum for senior students and junior staff of universities, to talk or present short courses on their fields of research and study. As well as serving the interests of U3A, this provides opportunities for them to gain some experience in presenting their work to a mature audience which, although not seized with the need to answer examination questions, is still intelligently critical and, above all, user-friendly.

Statistics

For each of the 48 weeks last year when classes were in progress, there was an average of 31 courses in progress, involving an estimated 55 class hours each week, There were approximately 800 enrolments in ongoing courses, 700 in shorter courses and 500 in summer courses, with many students enrolling in more than one course. Excluding summer courses, there would have been some 1400 course places to be filled by 650 active members - slightly in excess of two course-enrolment opportunities per member. Naturally, some courses were in greater demand than others, consequently some members did not get the course of their first preference or a course at a preferred time. However, every effort is made to arrange repeat courses to cater for such needs.

Origin of the Universities of the Third Age

The title 'University' is used in its original and mediaeval sense - an association or 'community' of scholars and teachers, united in the pursuit of knowledge. 'Third Age' refers to the life-period of active retirement, that which follows the first age of childhood and formal education and the second age of working life, ----and which precedes the fourth age of dependence.

The concept of U3A originated in Toulouse in 1972. Provision was made to bring older people into contact with academic programmes conducted by the university. One of these, a summer school , developed into a permanent organisation, adopting the title of University of the Third Age. It became the model for a movement which spread throughout French-speaking countries, including Canada. Most of the universities either absorbed older people into existing academic courses or instituted special programmes for older students. An

International Association of Universities of the Third Age was established in Toulouse in 1975.

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The first British U3A was inaugurated in Cambridge in July, 1981. Today there are some 300 such groups in the U K with a total membership exceeding 50,000. In contrast to the French experience, the British U3A have developed cooperative rather than dependent links with universities and have instead embraced principles of greater self-help and self-determination. These same principles have characterised the movement in Australia.

U3A in Australia

In the latter half of 1984 and early in 1985, public meetings were held in Melbourne - in the city, in Hawthorn and at Monash University - to gauge public interest in the U3A concept. Following these meetings two U3A were established, first in Melbourne City and then in Hawthorn, and the first courses were offered at the beginning of 1985. Two further U3A, at Monash and at Ringwood, opened later in 1985.

There are 63 U3A's in Victoria with a total membership of 16,500; others are in the process of formation. Similar interest has been generated in other States:

New South Wales (40), Queensland (25), South Australia (8), Tasmania (9),
West Australia (7), Australian Capital Territory (1), Northern Territory (1).
The 152 U3A's Australia-wide have an estimated total membership of 46,000

The Role of U3A in Adult Education

City U3A sees its role as providing opportunities for mature age adults to be involved in lifelong, lifewide education in an atmosphere of mutual learning and teaching, free from the constraints and pressures of more formal education systems and at a cost which does not preclude any from participation. It is believed that the contribution made by U3A is both unique and significant. However there are some further points to be made and some possible misconceptions that need to be examined together with the invasive problems that these involve.

First, U3A members should not be seen as either an elite group or a disadvantaged group; they represent a broad cross-section of the community with only two major distinguishing characteristics - sufficient leisure-time to indulge a desire for learning and the motivation to pursue this in company with others. Although the social aspects are significant they do not overshadow the learning component. By any reckoning education is, or should be, fundamentally a social process.

Secondly, care has to be exercised to ensure that U3A is not too lightly regarded as a fruitful field for study or manipulation by too many research workers, and bombarded with questionnaires and interviews. This does not mean that U3A will not willingly and actively engage in appropriate research itself or co-operate in other research projects in which it is seen as an active rather than merely a passive partner.

A further area of concern is that U3A does not wish to be seen as a therapeutic community for geriatric and related problems. The basic objective of U3A is the relatively simple one of shared learning and the achievement of this could be very seriously prejudiced if it were asked to adapt its programmes or to provide special programmes for groups of older people with personal or social problems.

This is not a callous disregard for the needs of such people - in fact several U3A include some community support activities within their programmes. City U3A has for many years offered substantial support to the TELELINK programme of the Melbourne City Mission; more than twenty U3A City tutors have been providing courses, through telephone conferencing technology, to house-bound older people, under these auspices.

There is however a limit to which such activities can be undertaken without prejudice to the basic objectives. Therapeutic functions can best be undertaken, in most cases, by social agencies especially equipped to perform them.

Finally, U3A have no wish to compete with the many other organisations which are doing excellent work in providing leisure-time and social activities, in their own specialised areas. Regular U3A courses cover a wide range of subjects in response to the expressed wishes of members, but as a general rule U3A does not duplicate programmes which are covered adequately by other community organisations, unless for some reason these are not easily accessible to members.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Whilst City U3A would now like to increase its membership it does not wish to expand to the stage where facilities become inadequate or where organisational complexity overrides the personal relationships which members enjoy. An immediate aim is to extend the number of courses, particularly shorter courses (four to eight weeks), in order to extend the variety of study subjects available to members. To this end we are anxious to recruit tutors or course leaders.

This submission has detailed the activities of an organization which, it is believed, plays a significant role in a national framework for lifewide and lifelong education as well as meeting many of the important needs of an ageing population. The changing structure of the labour force may mean that some people will remain in economic activity to a greater age than at present. On the other hand, for different reasons, many may leave full-time employment much earlier. Whatever the balance between these two groups, increased longevity, as a product of developments in medicine and life-styles, will increase the numbers seeking alternative activity, and particularly for opportunity to broaden life experience and acquire new skills to cope with an increasingly complex technological environment.

The transition from work to leisure, whether from a structured working environment or from the equally demanding responsibility of family care, can be a traumatic experience after the initial euphoria of freedom wears off. Apart from the exclusion from close contact with colleagues and other social groups, there is the absence of ordered activity and of the self-esteem which is an accompaniment of job achievement. Retirement frequently brings a sense of isolation of a somewhat similar kind to the loss of a lifelong partner. Both situations can have serious implications for physical and mental well-being.

Numerous studies and a wealth of anecdotal evidence support the view that a life-style of appropriate mental and physical activity and the opportunity for social contact and acceptance are essential to maintaining health and well-being in the ageing. Isolation, boredom and loss of self esteem on the other hand, are frequently identified as prime factors in advancing senility. Not only is this a tragedy in humanitarian terms, it also places increased burdens in the provision of institutional care, which would not otherwise be required.

U3A provides mental and physical activity in a non-threatening social setting which empowers individuals to identify and make known their needs and to play a key role in their satisfaction. We believe that it fulfils a useful function in providing opportunities for older persons to pursue an active and mentally stimulating lifestyle in company with others of similar interests, to keep abreast of community development, including changing technology, to maintain independence and self-esteem and to continue to make a worthwhile contribution to society.

We believe that organisations of this kind merit government support, but are apprehensive that bureaucratic requirements, which necessarily involve accountability for government funding, may either impose selective direction or restriction of activities, or demand complex administrative reports, checks and balances of a standard out of all proportion to the advantages obtained. We also have reservations about a funding authority selecting a peak body to divide resources amongst its constituent members; this merely creates yet another bureaucratic intervention.

We would suggest that the partial resourcing of U3A by RMIT University, provides a viable model for the provision of support for those community and adult education organisations, which can identify with and be part of the educational and community commitment of a university or similar body. Such an arrangement accepts the continuum of lifelong learning in an educational framework, whilst preserving integrity and independence. It also avoids the fragmentation of support for smaller elements, which by themselves could never achieve the requisite, desirable infrastructure. The universities and similar institutions should be provided the additional funding specifically to enable them to develop this kind of resourcing.

Additional considerations

This submission has concentrated on the educational aspects of the Standing Committee's terms of reference. There are, of course, other related aspects of ageing in which our members have an interest. One that is closely related to the educational area is the problem of mobility. No educational plans involving group, lifelong learning programmes can be effective unless the group members are able to access the venues where these are conducted. Moreover, mobility is a prime condition of aged persons' ability to live independent lives, to provide for themselves, to visit family and friends, to seek medical attention, to participate actively in their neighbourhood and to contribute to the community. There is an undisputed relationship between growing demands for institutional accommodation for the elderly and the increasing limits on mobility.

Yet recent developments in public transport have increasingly limited the mobility, not only of the more fragile of the elderly, but also members of other age groups in the community. The absence of conductors on trams, of guards and station attendants on railways, have severely curtailed the security of many such people and reduced their mobility. Mobility is also threatened in the private transport area, with the suggestion of age restrictions on driving licences and the failure of traffic authorities to insist that the public highways are as much the property of children, pedestrians, cyclists and more cautious drivers, as they are of drivers of all-wheel drives and large and articulated trucks.

. Another problem for organizations providing for older persons in educational and related areas is the relatively new age-restriction imposed by insurance companies on personal accident policies. Our insurance policy now excludes indemnity for persons aged

eighty-five and over, which means that a proportion of our membership is not covered for injury or disability sustained in the course of U3A activities. Whilst these activities cannot be classified as high-risk, there can be problems arising from equipment or furniture defects, falls, inadvertent negligence of our officers, etc. which might expose the organization to substantial compensation claims. There is a strong case for legislation against age-discrimination in this regard.

There is also a case for a re-examination of statutory provisions and customary practices in regard to age restrictions in employment, in the tenure of public office, in membership of boards and of committees and of similar arena. There are many reliable measures of capacity to enter or remain in such activities; age alone is not one of them.

.Age discrimination will no doubt have been a major concern in the Standing Committee's deliberations. U3A members support any action designed to circumscribe this and to counter the growth of 'ageism' in some sectors of society. We realise that older persons themselves have a role in this, in carefully examining their own attitudes, behaviour and expectations, to ensure respect for the rights of other groups and in not seeking privilege or special status. We believe that U3A contributes to this better understanding and provides opportunities for closer and meaningful relations with other age groups, particularly in circumstances like those enjoyed by U3A at RMIT University.

**For and on behalf of the Committee of Management
and Members of U3A City of Melbourne Incorporated**

Donald E Graves
Vice-President
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