

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into the progress and future direction of life-long learning

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U3A NETWORK-VICTORIA INC places the following submission before the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Reference Committee inquiry into the policies and strategies aimed at addressing the life-long-learning needs of an ageing population.

In making this submission we would make the point strongly that Adult Education, Life-long-learning, means much more than the continual training and re-training for new jobs/careers so that people can work on into their older years.

The University of the Third Age was founded in Toulouse, France, in 1972 to improve the quality of life for older people through contact with academic programs run by the university. The idea spread rapidly through Europe, and the nomenclature of the "Third Age" as the age of 'active retirement' following the first two ages (youth and work/homemaking) became accepted. An International Association of U3As established in 1975, gained recognition from the UN and UNESCO.

This movement, begun in France over 30 years ago, now has members in many European countries, Asia and Australasia, and in both North and South America.

The first British U3A (Cambridge 1981) began life as a self-help organisation - an intellectual democracy making no distinction between teachers and taught. So, members of U3A would participate by teaching, learning or assisting with planning and administration. This approach echoes the concept of a 'community of scholars' - the medieval origin of a university.

In 1984 the first Australian U3As were formed in Melbourne, based on the British model. They spread quickly throughout Victoria and, by 1989, to every other State and Territory, developing as voluntary, self-help organisations. By 2002 there were a minimum of 130 U3As across Australia with more than 52,000 members and growing rapidly. There are some differences in the way U3As are organised in each State but they all have the same reason for existence - allow older people to come together to seek further knowledge. Although many universities, TAFE Institutes, schools, community education groups and local councils support U3As by providing classrooms and other resources, accommodation can be a problem.

'Third Age Learning' has become a world wide movement that has grown rapidly in a remarkably short time. U3As are a vibrant part of it.

The Structure of U3As in Victoria

Each U3A is autonomous. There are no entry requirements for membership, no assessment of learning and no academic awards. The length of courses may vary; groups

may be any size and teaching may be done by an individual or a team.

U3A policy is to engage as many members as possible in the running of the organisation. This includes functions such as leading the classes, the organisation of the courses program, the management of the office and other administrative tasks. As all the organisation, the administration and classes are run by volunteers, low annual membership subscriptions have been sufficient to cover overheads but recently, as rentals have increased, some U3As are having difficulties. Sometimes when special equipment has to be used, members are asked to pay a separate enrolment fee for some classes but usually members, having paid the annual subscription can join as many classes as they wish. Fees have been deliberately kept low so that as wide a group as possible will be involved and this broad grouping has proved to be one of the successes because of the variety of life experiences that are brought together.

In Victoria we now have 66 separate U3As, all self-governing, brought together under the U3A Network Victoria for mutual support and the exchange of ideas.

The U3As are in both city and country and involve more than 18,000 people. The number of U3As continues to grow as the Network encourages and assists new groups to come together.

The list of subjects covered are across the broadest range; more than a dozen different languages, literature of all sorts, histories of countries and ideas, theatre, film, philosophy, psychology, art, music, astronomy, geology, exercise, handcrafts, and is only limited by the availability of a tutor or facilitator.

The use of computers and the Internet has effected the way people teach and learn and this is as true of older people and U3A.

Most U3As have computer classes. They have begged, borrowed or bought computers. Members learn to use them for word processing, They use the Internet for interest and for material for classes. They E-mail family and friends around the world. Some grandparents are in constant touch with grandchildren. Some U3A committees only communicate by E-mail. They go into Power Point presentations for classes.

Some older people are very familiar and expert with computer technology but many of them would not have been, without U3A and the confidence they were given there to learn these new skills. They would not have been able to afford the cost of going to TAFE classes and there is a lot of difference to confidence if you are learning with your own age group at your level

Unfortunately not all U3As have been fortunate enough to have gained such equipment and those skills.. While governments have made special efforts to make sure up to date

computers are available for many sections of the community, they have omitted to assist the mature section to become better acquainted and familiar with their use in modern society.

If older people had ready access to up to date computers and equipment, it could only mean they would be happier and more confident in dealing with modern technology and all the changes that are happening rather than feeling dispirited and isolated.

The availability of accommodation is the greatest problem we have at this time in Victoria. It is essential when planning from year to year to be able to depend on certain accommodation. Some of our U3As have a membership of around 1000 members with 50 or more classes and we do not run classes once a month or once a week. Many U3As run classes all day, five days a week and at several different venues. This is a deal of accommodation and it is often difficult to achieve because local government, which apart from private homes, is our chief landlord, seems loath to give leases and most often asks a high rent. Rent for other accommodation has become increasingly expensive over the last few years.

Value of U3A to the Community.

We believe the stimulation, interest and friendship which arise out of U3A classes give the lives of older people a purpose that keeps them from isolation and some despair. We note that the Minister in his statement "Adult Learning in Australia - You Can Too" notes when discussing 'The Value of Learning' that "There is even growing evidence to suggest that learning has positive health effects, particularly for older members of our community".

We have ourselves read of the work of senior research scientist, Prof. Tony Broe, at Sydney's Prince of Wales Research Institute.

As reported, it was said that with more Australians living longer, scientists have warned that while the body might be willing, the brain often is not.

"Although people become physically healthier once they reach 80, more people are dealing with the difficulties of degenerative illnesses of the mind.

And, like the body, it is important to keep the brain exercised to protect it against early deterioration.

Professor Broe said - "Intellectual vigour, education and taking an interest in life appeared to be protective of brain function".

Our attention has also been drawn to the work of Professor Frederick Mendelsohn and the Howard Florey Institute in developing more effective drugs for a wide range of brain and mind disorders.

The Institute has developed the 'Maintain Your Brain' program for community groups

throughout Melbourne to raise awareness of debilitating brain and mind disorders. These programs have been offered to the University of the 3rd Age.

Professor Mendelsohn has been quoted as saying that he has had the pleasure of talking to 3 different U3As and "The people attending these seminars are excellent examples of how continued mental and social activity may help to maintain brain function. Indeed we now have evidence from studies of inherited neurodegenerative disease that this is true. The Florey's Dr Anthony Hannan has shown that environmental enrichment can markedly delay the deleterious effects of an inherited mutation that causes Huntington's disease in a strain of mice. The old adage of 'use it or lose it' seems to be right".

These are just the qualities that U3A encourages in older people - intellectual vigour, education and an interest in life. We believe government support for such research and consequent support in the community to see to it that more and more older people receive this type of stimulation could give those people a richer and more productive life, reduce the number of people for whom there appears to be nothing other than nursing home care and leave the community with a more positive attitude to old age which after all is just a matter of growing older, it is not a disease.

Many members report that it was U3A that was vital to them as they struggled to re-adjust to new conditions in their lives following retirement, loss of employment, loss of a partner, the increased self-reliance of family and reduced incomes. It has been shown that many older people have fallen into a debilitating mental state, even suicide, because of these events in their lives. U3A brought back purpose, interest, friendship and fun, and people began a new life, a third age.

Much of government emphasis over the last few years has been on programs assisting 15 - 19year olds, keeping them in education and training, away from drugs and despair - and rightly so. We have no argument with that but there are many more 50 -100year olds in the community who also need attention to keep them from drugs and despair and this group is growing in number.

Education for older people is as important in its own right as Vocational training because of the benefit it brings to the community.

Education for older people in this guise, in a non-competitive environment, with tutors and class members of their own age, an environment where whatever experience and skills they have are of interest and can be shared, and where they are valued as members of the community. An environment where they have become role models for their grandchildren who see them have such enthusiasm for and obvious enjoyment of learning - not just learning to get a piece of paper saying how they can earn their living - but for the pleasure of it. All this can only result in healthy ageing.

All their skills and senses are stimulated. Even at these older ages there is personal development with people using skills they have newly acquired and thus there is greater accumulation of social capital.

This must mean there is less need for medical intervention as early as it is sometimes used. U3A provides so much stimulation to this group and it is so easy for government to support this activity for such a splendid reward.

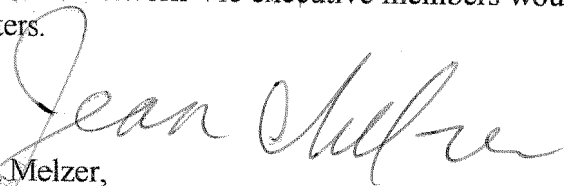
What can Government Do.

Provide funds to the Network to assist the establishment of more U3As.

Assist the individual U3As to obtain up-to-date computer equipment.

Assist U3As to obtain reasonable accommodation at affordable rates by using Commonwealth property or by subsidy.

The U3A Network Vic executive members would be pleased to elaborate on any of these matters.



Jean Melzer,
President.

18th June 2004.