

# 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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21 June 2004

Senator George Campbell  
Chair

Employment, Workplace Relations & Education References Committee  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA A.C.T. 2600

Dear Senator

Please find enclosed a submission concerning *Life Long Learning* for the attention of the Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee. This submission is made by the University of the Third Age Ballina/Byron Inc.

We would be pleased to add to, or explain further, the contents of the submission if that is the wish of the References Committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Brian Lewis".

Brian Lewis  
President

**EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND**  
**EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE – LIFE LONG**  
**LEARNING INQUIRY**



**INTRODUCTION**

The concept of life long learning is generally considered to be desirable, for many reasons, including the acquiring and application of new skills and knowledge to promote a better economy and community. A major conceptual difficulty is that often 'life long learning' is considered to apply only to 'working life'. Life long learning should apply equally to those who have left the workforce, but who remain valuable members of the community, and who can gain personal benefits as well as contributing in a volunteer role to the betterment of their community.

**THIS SUBMISSION**

This submission is prepared by the University of the Third Age Ballina/Byron Inc. [U3A]. This is a volunteer community organization in the northern rivers area of NSW, serving the needs of older, mainly retired, members of the community. U3A provides a range of classes and activities to allow its members to gain new knowledge and skills and to remain physically and mentally active.

The U3A concept first started in France in 1973, to encourage learning for 'Third Age' persons, that is, those who have passed the 'first age' of childhood, and the 'second age' of employment, family raising and professional life. U3A Ballina/Byron Inc. commenced more than ten years ago. The region it serves has a high percentage of retired persons. The membership of our U3A is approximately 400 at any time, although community involvement is much greater as many members join and then leave as their need for particular classes is satisfied. Many will rejoin at a later time.

U3A is a self funding volunteer community organization. The fees that are set cover the administrative and running costs only. All class leaders/tutors provide their services free, and members are encouraged to input their own skills and knowledge for the betterment of other members. The largest running costs are the rental of buildings to conduct classes, and the provision of a basic insurance cover to protect the volunteers who freely provide their services. All the administrative functions of running an office are also carried out by volunteers.

We provide classes in acquiring knowledge (examples are various history and philosophy classes), acquiring skills (languages, photography, computers), developing physical fitness (yoga, shibashi, bush walking) and providing social interaction (poetry, passive recreation, book chat). At any given time there could be up to 30 different classes offered to our members.

**NEED FOR LIFE LONG LEARNING**

Many studies in Australia and elsewhere have shown that older persons who are physically and mentally active live longer, and have a more satisfying life style. Personal satisfaction with life style is increasingly important as persons are tending both to retire at an earlier age and live longer. An extended period of 'post retirement' living requires positive steps from governments and the community generally to provide suitable activities to involve persons and to ensure their continued input into their community. Retired people have much to offer, if encouraged, and their involvement and input can benefit the whole community. Their knowledge and skills can

be used in mentoring, problem solving and community development. However, sometimes these older citizens need encouragement and support in order for them to recognize that they do have valuable skills and knowledge, and that the community wants their involvement and input. Further, sometimes these skills and knowledge need to be refined and updated to make them more beneficial. Ongoing learning to update, refine, and adapt to current value systems is an important part of this process.

## **NEEDS SATISFIED**

### *Mental Stimulation*

Mentally active older persons are more likely to remain active in their community. They are in a better position to contribute their knowledge and skills to a younger generation. Life long learning will enhance and update their current attributes in an incremental manner, allowing a more effective transfer of skills and knowledge to others. A confident, mentally alert older person is more likely to offer services, and to be sought out by younger community members seeking guidance and the benefit of experience.

### *Physical Activity*

Involvement in physically stimulating structured learning experiences, such as the classes organized by U3A, will allow the older person to remain involved in the community. Physical fitness creates a more varied and interesting life style. Being physically fit generally results in fewer calls on community medical and hospital facilities, with considerable savings in servicing and capital expenditure for Governments, especially for hospitals, pharmaceuticals and dedicated housing for the aged. The quality of life is enhanced, which is a positive result for the individual and the general community.

### *Communications*

Updating technical skills allows older persons to take advantage of improved communications which the younger generations take for granted. The ability to use email is a very positive means of communications, with the advantage of allowing the older citizen to keep in contact with relatives and friends. Similarly the ability to use the internet will allow research and updating of knowledge in areas of particular interest or concern to older persons. However older persons have not had the advantage of acquiring these skills at school or through work, and thus require separate structured learning programs. Further, in the case of those older persons who may be frail or physically handicapped, the use of computers may be the only realistic means of communicating effectively. U3A has learning programs which take into consideration the disadvantaged, frail or physically handicapped.

### *Access to commercial and community services*

Increasingly, access to services is governed by being computer literate. Many services are provided through web sites or computer facilities, some exclusively. In other cases where there may be an alternative to gain access to services through contact with a 'real person', there may be financial penalties. Some of these services are essential to live; others are highly desirable to give effect to a better life style. Some examples are the use of ATM facilities at banks, the convenience of internet banking from home, purchase of goods and services at discounted rates over the internet, and the ability to make considered decisions on purchases by having access to comparative prices through the internet. A good example of the latter is the ability to access the

RTA site when purchasing Compulsory Third Party insurance coverage when registering vehicles in N.S.W.

Taxation requirements necessitate the accurate recording of purchases and sales of investment goods, which many older citizens use for their continued survival. Manual methods are inefficient and prone to error. Learning the skills necessary to make investment decisions and record them in an appropriate and acceptable manner is essential. Further, the Australian Taxation Office encourages the submitting of taxation returns by electronic means, which affects most people, and is another reason why older people need ongoing learning to be able to access such techniques.

Unless there are facilities for life long learning for older citizens to acquire such skills, a significant section of the community will be disadvantaged.

### **GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT**

Governments at the Federal, State and Local Government levels all have a responsibility to ensure that a significant portion of the population is not disadvantaged.

Governments at each level should be prepared to make specific contributions, rather than 'motherhood' statements about the advantages of life long learning. The level of contributions may vary, for example, Local Government could supply suitable land for premises and ongoing rate relief, whilst State and Federal Governments could share the cost of infrastructure and equipment.

Governments already provide support and assistance for learning for other parts of the community. Assistance is provided for pre-school facilities. Both public and private schools receive significant funding from Government budgets. Universities are funded for post school learning, and post graduate training is encouraged and supported. Training in commerce and industry receives incentives and taxation breaks. The glaring exception is the 'third age' sector, which misses out.

It is not valid to suggest that the availability of TAFE organizations is an acceptable strategy. These programs are costly for the retired, have younger attendees which might make the older learner uncomfortable, and are focused on training for industry. Other factors affecting the ability of the older learner to utilize TAFE or similar institutions are their reduced visual and auditory capacity, their lack of knowledge of modern technology and means of learning, and in many cases their natural resistance to change in a world that has changed almost beyond their comprehension.

Census figures show that this 'third age' sector is growing rapidly. A significant and increasingly important sector of the community should not be ignored or disadvantaged. The advantages for the individuals have been mentioned. For Governments, there could be significant financial advantages if modest support for life long learning schemes resulted in lower usage and costs in the health system.

This submission presents some general observations about the advantages of life long learning, applicable to all communities, and in addition makes specific recommendations for the area in which we live.

## SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All levels of Government should be prepared to make financial commitments to support life long learning. Education may be a State responsibility primarily, but each level of Government has things to gain by supporting life long learning.
2. A dedicated, suitable building should be provided in the Northern Rivers area for the purpose of providing learning experiences for 'third age' people. Whilst needs in other areas are likely to be similar, circumstances may vary, especially depending on local government support and services.
3. Such a building should take into account the needs of the group and area. As some of the older learners may be frail or disabled, any building should reflect these considerations.
4. A dedicated building is required. Co-sharing school, TAFE, or similar premises is not feasible as older learners need day time classes, and these facilities are being used at these times.
5. Such a building should be located in a suitable area, with available public transport.
6. The building should be suitably equipped with air conditioning, fans, heating and other comfort features.
7. Other necessary equipment should include tables, chairs, white boards/ black boards, and equipment for effective presentations. This would include computers, projectors, presentation software and any other special equipment appropriate to specific classes.
8. Insurance coverage is a problem. Although U3A has never made an insurance claim, the cost of providing a basic insurance coverage for its volunteers and a public risk policy is almost prohibitive. A Government initiative to provide a cheap group insurance policy reflecting the risks involved is desirable.
9. U3A recognizes that it should make some contribution towards learning programs. It already inputs free tutoring, administration and management, but would be prepared to contribute some ongoing fees. However, the costs of buildings and capital equipment are beyond its means.
10. Rural and remote areas warrant some special consideration. In such areas, choices are more limited, facilities are fewer, and the opportunities for learning experiences are less. If pilot programs are introduced, an area such as the Northern Rivers would be ideal because of its size, regional location, high proportion of retired people, and existing initiatives for learning which can be build on through further Government initiatives.