

What is a U3A?

Background

It's easiest to describe the ideas underlying a University of the Third Age (U3A) by starting at the 'Third Age' part.

Many writers have tried to simplify the description of the complex experience of life by dividing it into a series of different stages. Perhaps the best known in English is Shakespeare's version, from *As you Like It*, where

...All the world's a stage...

And one man in his time plays many parts,

His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,

Mewling and puking in his nurse's arms.

And so he goes on, to his seventh and last stage, of

... second childishness and mere oblivion,

Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Well there are many elderly people who certainly don't conform to that description! A more recent division, originating in France in the early 1970s, goes something like this. The **First Age** is that of *childhood and youthful dependence*, leading to the **Second Age** of *independence, maturity, work and home building*. Next comes the **Third Age, the age of active retirement**. This description, with the inclusion of the adjective **active**, seems to many to be not only a useful way of describing a significant part of the lives of many people, but one which has a ring of optimism about it. And then, in this scheme comes (for some) the **Fourth Age** of final dependence and decrepitude.

Using these terms, it is apparent that a remarkable phenomenon has occurred within a century – a dramatic growth in that proportion of the populations of developed countries which consists of people in their **Third Age**. In Australia, for example, the over 65's were only 4% of the total population in 1900. By 1990 this figure had reached 12% and by 2020 it will be 16%.

As people enter the **Third Age** they are **active, both physically and mentally**. They obviously see it as being in their interests to stay in that condition if they can – i.e. to extend the **Third Age** as long as possible and reduce to a minimum (or even eliminate) the **Fourth Age**. It is clearly in the interests of the rest of the community to encourage and promote such an attitude. For some time, now, we have been seeing increased emphasis on healthy, active life-styles for all, including elderly. But much of this has primarily been concerned with the maintenance of physical activity. Rather little attention is, by comparison, given to the desirability of, at the same time, **maintaining intellectual activity**, even though it is possible that the latter may be the more important in helping stretch out the span of the

Third Age. This is one of the many starting-points for the promotion of the U3A movement.

For many, this process of **keeping active mentally** can be accomplished through **deliberate learning**, whether through **studies** of the **traditional kind** or through **less formal structures**. Unfortunately, our traditional educational institutions are not attuned to the needs of many older learners. What alternatives exist?

One answer is provided by recognising that the large body of **Third-Agers** contain the **greatest untapped reservoir of knowledge, skills and experience** in the community. In educational terms, one of the best ways for **Third-Agers** to learn is from one another. That is what the **University of the Third Age** (U3A) movement is all about in this country. The use of the term 'University' in the title, therefore, derives from a conceptual link with the communities of scholars which characterised the original medieval universities. Or, as one commentator on the development of U3As in the UK puts it:

There is a slightly tongue-in-cheek feature about the deployment of the word 'university.' The studied inference is that the U3A is not one of your new-fangled, modern universities of the last hundred or so years ... with arbitrary notions of what constitutes scholarship, with a bizarre urge to grade and re-grade its clients in an atmosphere false competitiveness. The U3A, the inference continues, is of a purer, more ancient stamp. It returns to the older connotation of the early medieval university. In other words, the U3A cocks a perky snook at the conventional university and, by implication, criticises it.

An obvious corollary of this community-of-scholars notion is that *no-one* in the group should be *paid for teaching*. It is then a logical step to think in terms of *voluntary administration*; if this is possible, the *whole operation becomes a voluntary, self-help organisation*, and that, indeed is what has been achieved in the U3As set up in Australia.

At the same time, the use of the **term 'University'** may be a bit off-putting to some older people. Indeed, many groups have devised titles for themselves which don't include that word. However, the fact remains that the general term '**Universities of the Third Age**' as a description of a distinctive class of educational groups has gained world-wide acceptance and is used by bodies such as the UN and UNESCO. It is now becoming increasingly **recognised in educational and government circles in Australia**, so it is in our interest to use it when talking about this movement, whatever the names of individual groups.

U3As in Practice

The first **University of the Third Age** was founded in Toulouse, France in 1972 to improve the quality of life for older people by bringing them into contact with academic programs run by the university. The idea spread rapidly in France, with

many universities either absorbing older people into existing academic programs or setting up courses especially for **Third-Agers**. The success of the French experiment has led to the rapid spread of U3As to many other countries, particularly in continental Europe. An **International Association of U3As** was established by 1975; it now has over 100 members.

In July 1981, the U3A concept was introduced to Britain through a group based at Cambridge University. In contrast to the French practice, the British U3As quickly evolved away from the model based on pre-packaged courses provided by the universities. Instead, they adopted the idea of a self-help or mutual-aid university – *a kind of intellectual democracy in which there would be no distinction between teachers and taught. There would only be members of U3A, who would all be encouraged to participate, either by **teaching, learning or assisting** with **planning and administration**.* The self-help approach reduces the need for dependence on outside resources.

In this environment, learning is an end in itself; **individuals learn what they like, at the *pace they prefer***. No qualifications are required to enter, neither are any qualifications awarded.

In the latter part of 1984 the first Australian U3A's were formed in Melbourne, based on the British rather than on the original French model. U3As have since been established throughout Victoria, and so successful has the Victorian experience been, that the movement is now Australia-wide.

U3As are voluntary, self-help organisations. They tap the great reservoir of knowledge, skills and experience which is to be *found among older people* and which is often undervalued or overlooked.

All of the teaching, planning and administration of a U3A is carried out by its own members. Thus there is no need to rely on the establishment (or the initiative) of some educational institutions before a U3A can be set up; this distinguishes U3As from the traditional approaches to educational provision in our society, although in some instances help has been given in their launching.

Each U3A is autonomous. Classes are planned jointly by tutors and students in response to members' interests. A tutor in one class is likely to become a student in another. The backgrounds of tutors vary greatly but all enjoy sharing with others interests which they have pursued for many years.

Sometimes a group may invite a visitor as a speaker or activity leader, but all such contributions, like those of the U3A members themselves, are voluntary.

The areas of study are *negotiated* to meet the needs of the learning groups; a course may be short or long, depending on the requirements of the subject and the

interests of the group. Groups may be of any size according to need. Teaching may be done by one individual or a team. Styles vary from highly participatory to conventional lecture techniques.

U3A policy is to engage the help of as many members as possible to establish and keep operating the various areas of administration which are needed: the registration of members, finance, organisation of activities, newsletters, room bookings, publicity releases, committee work and the day-to-day running of an office.

Annual membership subscriptions are kept as low as possible – most are in the range of \$15 to \$25 for an individual member. This covers overhead costs of the organisation and, since all tutors are volunteers, there is no enrolment fee for any class and a member can join any number of U3A activities.

A U3A is a self-help group that derives its strength from its members' capabilities and the sharing of their knowledge and experience.

*The above description comes from a pamphlet published
by the U3A Network-Victoria.*