

An International Perspective of the University of the Third Age

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Author Identification Notes

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Abstract

The University of the Third Age (U3A) is a highly successful adult education movement providing opportunities for older adults to enjoy a range of activities associated with well-being in later life. Two substantially different approaches, the original French approach, and the British approach which evolved a few years later, have become the dominant U3A models adopted by different countries. Within many countries communications between the individual U3A groups is limited; between countries there is even less communication. Thus, very little, that is readily accessible, has been written about U3A developments internationally. This article provides an overview of U3A in many countries. Data were obtained by contacting colleagues in a number of countries for up-to-date information about U3As in their region.

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Well-being and the Third Age

In his book, *A Fresh Map of Life*, Laslett (1989) puts into perspective a number of recent demographic and sociological changes which have given rise to the comparatively recent phenomenon of the Third Age. Until the first half of this century adults spent virtually all their lives in the Second Age, working and caring for family. They then entered the Fourth Age, a period of dependency and decrepitude prior to death. A fundamental change in this centuries-old pattern began to emerge in many countries, from around the 1950s. Then, for the first time in history, a combination of compulsory retirement, pensions and increased longevity resulted in the great majority of older people in industrialized countries spending many healthy, active, and potentially self-fulfilling years in the Third Age.

Recent research is beginning to reveal a number of intriguing links between an individual's well-being and activity patterns during the Third Age. For example, measurable beneficial changes in the musculo-skeletal system can be achieved through a combination of sensible diet and exercise (Emery & Blumenthal, 1990). Another correlate with modifiable health is identified by MacNeil and Teague (1987) who point to studies which consistently show that "...healthy active people who continue their intellectual interests as they grow older tend to maintain and even increase, various dimensions of cognitive functioning" (p. 115).

Although a cause-effect relationship between intellectual challenge in later life and an individual's ability to continue to function effectively may remain difficult to establish, the empowering nature of education provides a convincing rationale for increasing the range of opportunities for older people. Groombridge (1982) suggests five major reasons why policy makers, society at large and the elderly themselves should recognise the importance of late life education. These are:

- Education can foster the self-reliance and independence of the elderly ... thereby reducing the increasing demands being made on public and private resources.
- Education is a major factor in enabling older people to cope with innumerable practical and psychological problems in a complex, changing and fractured world.
- Education for and by older people themselves strengthens their actual or potential contribution to society.
- Self-awareness by older people, their self-interpretation and the communication of their experiences to other generations fosters balance, perspective and understanding which is valuable in a rapidly changing world of conflict.
- Education is crucial for many older people who strive for expression and learning.

Groombridge's list highlights the increasingly important role which education can play in delaying or minimizing dependence by the rapidly growing older population, on the public purse. Those with knowledge of a range of options in later life are more likely to be able to retain their independence than those whose options are limited.

In many countries, exercise and diet are common themes of preventative health programs directed at people of all ages. However, the benefits of cognitive challenge in later life are less tangible than those associated with exercise and diet. As a consequence it might seem unrealistic to suggest that large numbers of adults in their Third Age would be interested in taking part in systematic, intellectually challenging programs, particularly when, as yet, there are no clearly measurable rewards for doing so.

Nevertheless, this is exactly what is happening in many countries. A rapidly growing range of adult education programs for older people is now available specifically to meet the needs and interests of older learners. Of these, probably the best known is the University of the Third Age (U3A) which has emerged as an international adult education success story for older learners. However, despite the very rapid spread of the U3A idea, which often has occurred without direct financial or "in kind" support from governments or mainstream educational bodies, little has been published which allows evaluations of the strengths and weaknesses of various U3A approaches to be made. The major aim of this paper is to provide a baseline understanding of international U3A activities and to highlight the need for improved communications between U3A groups.

Two University of the Third Age models¹

Two distinctly different approaches to U3A have been successfully adopted by a number of countries. The original French model required U3As to be associated with traditional university systems. In contrast the British model, which developed some years later, is largely of a self-help kind with little or no support from external sources. Other approaches, which incorporate some of the features of each of these "parent" models, have evolved to suit local conditions. Details of the various approaches are outlined in the section dealing with U3A approaches by country.

The French Model

An appropriate political climate for the evolution of an idea like U3A was established in France in 1968 when legislation was passed requiring universities to provide more community education. In 1973 a highly rated gerontology course, run by Toulouse University of Social Sciences exclusively for local retired people, led to the formation of the first U3A. The U3A was open to anyone over retirement age; no qualifications or examinations were required or offered, and fees were kept to a minimum. By 1975 the idea had spread to other French universities as well as to universities in Belgium, Switzerland, Poland, Italy, Spain and across the Atlantic to Sherbrooke in Quebec and San Diego in California. AIUTA was formed in the same year and, by 1981, more than 170 member institutions belonged.²

Different U3A approaches began to develop by the late 1970s, even within France, including several which were a direct creation of local government and not connected with a university. The original focus on older people by universities also began to broaden to include other educationally disadvantaged groups. In many places the programs were advertised for early retirees, housewives, the unemployed and those with physical handicaps. Some U3As were renamed to reflect the changing emphasis, for example, University of Leisure Time, and Inter-Age University.

Courses vary widely in content, style of presentation and format. In general they exhibit a mixture of open lectures, negotiated access to established university courses, contracted courses, study groups, workshops, excursions and physical health programs. Content is mainly in the humanities and arts. Funding also varies considerably. Some U3As are largely university funded; some are funded by a combination of fees, donations, and direct financial subsidy from the local township; and some are mainly member-funded on a sliding scale, depending on participants' assets. Perhaps reflecting recent difficult economic circumstances, greater numbers of U3As in the 90s are placing more of the onus on participants to pay for courses and facilities.

The British Model

U3A underwent a substantial change when it reached Cambridge in 1981. Rather than relying on university good will the founders of the British model adopted an approach in which there was to be no distinction between the teachers and the taught (Laslett, 1989). Members would be the teachers as well as the learners and, where possible, members should engage in research activities. The "self-help" ideal was based on the knowledge that experts of every kind retire, thus, there should be no need for older learners to have to rely on paid or unpaid Second Age teachers. Laslett provides a substantial rationale for this approach.

The self-help approach has been highly successful in Britain as well as in other countries such as Australia and New Zealand. Some of the strengths of the approach include: minimal membership fees; accessible classes run in community halls, libraries, private homes, schools, and so forth; flexible timetables and negotiable curriculum and teaching styles; wide course variety ranging from the highly academic to arts, crafts and physical activity; no academic constraints such as entrance requirements or examinations; and, the opportunity to mix with alert like-minded people who enjoy doing new things. Each U3A is independent and is run by a democratically elected management committee of members.

Brief descriptions of the French and British models in practice, as well as approaches which appear to be hybrids of the two, appear in the following section.

An Overview of U3A Approaches by Country

Australia

The British model of U3A was introduced to Melbourne in 1984. By 1994 the movement was providing a wide variety of intellectually demanding courses, crafts and social activities for some 18,000 older learners in more than 108 independent campuses operating in all States and Territories of Australia. This growth has taken place with no centralized coordination, and little or no support from government, funding agencies or professional educators. The few U3As which are associated with universities or colleges are fully self-governing with university input being largely of a facilitative nature.

Apart from a few exceptions communications between the U3As is limited. A number of well organised State networks exist, however, many individual U3As remain strongly resistant to the idea of a national organization similar to that operating so successfully in the U.K. or the U.S.A. Members who have "experienced a lifetime of bureaucracy [are wary of] introducing a layer of unnecessary officialdom" (Swindell, 1993, p. 260) when the organization is running well. In light of the lack of communication between most U3As it seems somewhat surprising that the approach has been so uniform and so successful across Australia's very large land mass (about the same area as the USA). McDonell (1991) attributes this to a combination of economic and political constraints which would have seriously hindered attempts to develop anything other than a self-help approach. Discussions about possible U3A developments in Australia in the early 1980s coincided with the release of a policy paper by the Federal Government expressing concern that the rapidly increasing number of mature age students in higher education should not be at the expense of enrolments by young people when demand for places exceeded supply.

A recent discussion of the strengths, weaknesses and some implications for the future of Australian U3A approach appears elsewhere (Swindell, 1993).

China

Since the end of the cultural revolution, governments have regarded education as important for helping the more than 100 million older Chinese to adapt to social change. The largest program for older learners is the network of 400 Universities for the Aged (UAs) which provides academic programs for some 470,000 older learners. UAs have no entry requirements other than a minimum age of 50. The aging population differs widely in terms of education background, income and health so the curricula of the UAs vary to suit prevailing needs. In some cities the UAs are very "prestigious" and attract professors of high repute as teachers. Some also appear to be more like traditional universities in that they have examinations and offer degrees. Courses are taught by part-time teachers who may receive small honoraria to cover transportation and to pay for correcting homework. Participants pay small fees and some government subsidies are provided. Competition for places in UAs is high. In order to help meet unmet demand UAs provide print and audiovisual materials for the elderly who are unable to attend.

Many corporations organize U3A-like activities for their retired staff; fees are usually minimal because caring for older workers is seen as a normal part of their work in dealing with human resources. The majority of China's U3As, however, are associated with recreational centres which offer a range of activities and resources including recreational games, sport, health facilities and communal dining. In smaller villages U3A groups are located in schools, and many offer courses in reading and writing to older people with poor literacy skills.

By 1993 approximately 5,300 schools, colleges and U3As were operating for older learners throughout China. Students in the wide variety of programs include people from all walks of life and social strata -- retired generals, workers, peasants. They study a great diversity of courses such as gerontology, psychology, health, hygiene, politics, social science, natural science, poetry, English, theater and so forth, as well as specialized electives like Chinese calligraphy, painting, photography, dancing, cooking, gardening and sport. Some groups have begun cultural exchanges with foreign guests and offer special courses as well as the hospitality of family homes. (Data on the Chinese U3As were provided by Francoise Louis, Cliff Picton, and Pingsheng Liu)

Continental Europe

France and Belgium.

Most of the U3As in France and Belgium are linked to universities, although the degree of association varies considerably. Some U3As are full university services, others are there on a more "charitable" basis. All maintain high academic standards regardless of whether or not they are affiliated with a university.

Over the past few years many U3As have considerably broadened their activities to provide courses for housewives, the unemployed, public servants, and younger people including university students. In some cases the former U3As have been renamed as Leisure Universities, Free Time Universities, or Inter-Ages Universities to reflect the broader community focus which many universities are now adopting. Despite this increasing emphasis on the "Free Time University" approach, which is open to all adults, the majority of participants are over 60. Those U3As run a wide range of academic courses with some social and research activities included. There is also a growing trend towards higher fees being charged for U3A services because universities play less of a sponsoring role than they did in the past. Increasingly, participants are being asked to pay for materials, and hire of classrooms and premises, and these charges are

passed on to older learners. In turn, this is leading to a change in the curriculum from an emphasis on learning for pleasure towards learning new work skills. Despite this, education in later life remains an activity enjoyed by couples or singles. For example, in the Université des Aînés in Belgium, the ratio of women to men is 60:40 and 40% of all participants are couples.

Both countries have a national body; the French one organizes a conference every two years and publishes an annual newsletter. Neither body exerts any influence over the individual groups.

AIUTA knows little about the U3A activities in the Flemish regions of Belgium. Some are associated with universities, some are not.

Switzerland.

Twenty-one U3As are university-linked and these emphasize highly academic courses. Every canton (local government grouping) has its own U3A group. If there is no university in a canton, the U3A is linked to a nearby university. Most U3A courses appear not to be open to young people.

Netherlands.

The majority of the 25 U3As are university-linked although a number of self-help groups exist, like the one in Roosendaal. Regardless of affiliation, all Dutch U3As have rigorous academic standards. In some cases, special curricula leading to a diploma have been established specifically for the aging. Some debate is taking place over whether academic standards should be liberalized, or the curriculum broadened, in order to attract a wider cross section of the aging population.

Germany.

German U3As are mainly university-linked and quite academic in nature. Instruction is undertaken by university professors who believe special teaching methods and programs must be developed to suit the needs of the aging.

Austria.

Austria has developed a U3A approach which is unlike either the French or UK models. Universities make provision for qualified older students to participate in the normal academic program, and Austrian U3As are, in fact, associations of older university students. These associations argue for the rights of older people in the university, and their delegates attend Senate meetings. (Data on the U3As in Continental Europe were provided by Francoise Louis.)

Southern Europe

In Italy there are 152 U3As running courses which are mainly of an academic nature although not all are linked to universities. Spain has 77 U3As and "antennae" which provide educational and social activities for poorer sections of the community. At least six are university-based. In Portugal, the movement is newer. The first national meeting of U3As was not held until late 1993 and a national association is mooted for 1994; there are currently seven established groups, mostly run by unpaid volunteers. Some have tried to develop links with universities, so far without success. Courses such as sociology, theology, history, religion, languages, literature, and so forth are taught by university-level teachers and include some excursions and social

activities. There is also an emphasis on arts and crafts courses. Portugal faces special problems with illiteracy of the older generation so courses are also run in reading and writing.

Scandinavia

AIUTA has little information about U3As in northern Europe other than: Denmark has a long tradition of adult education including special academies for older people, some of which appear to be like U3A; Sweden has 15 U3As associated with universities but managed by volunteers; Finland has three university-linked U3A groups; and Norway has four U3As, two of which are in Oslo.

Eastern Europe

The 16 Polish U3As have quite strong links with universities. These belong to a national association which is integrated into the Warszawa Medicine Faculty. Polish U3As have developed close relationships with French U3As, particularly in the field of preparation for retirement. The self-help U3A approach has grown strongly in the Czech Republic with at least 45 U3A groups operating independently. A national organization has recently been created to further communications between the groups. AIUTA knows of three university-linked U3A groups in Slovakia and only one in Estonia.

Great Britain and Ireland

United Kingdom.

As described earlier in this paper, U3A evolved as a self-help model when it came to Great Britain in 1981. By the start of 1994, total membership in some 240 U3As in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland was over 32,000. Group membership ranges from 20 to more than 1000. At first a program may be modest; perhaps Local History, Books, Creative Writing or Music. Physical activities such as walking, swimming or exercises are often included as part of a balanced lifestyle approach. Usually there is a monthly Open Meeting for members to meet socially. Gradually the members build up other interests such as Languages, Science and Technology, or Crafts. Often, what starts out as formal teaching develops into group learning. Freedom from authority and complete flexibility encourages groups to experiment until they find an approach which best suits their needs. New groups are often held in members' homes when other accommodation is hard to find or too expensive. In spite of limitations on space, these groups provide a friendly and informal environment for learning.

Tutors and organizers are not paid, but running costs are covered by a small annual membership fee. From this a capitation fee is paid to the National Executive, enabling it to run a small office in London with four part time workers. A newspaper, "Third Age News", is issued three times a year with a free copy to each individual member. Executive members are elected at an annual conference lasting 3-5 days. The conference is organised by volunteers and provides an important opportunity for meeting, sharing ideas and planning future activities.

During the last eleven years links between local U3As have been strengthened through National Subject Networks which link members with common interests, and arrange seminar days and workshops. At present eight of these networks cover Languages, Interpreters and Translators, Penfriends, Walking, Art and Music, Creative Writing, Science and Technology, and the Travel Club (which organizes a program of study tours).

Local groups often assist older and immobilized members by arranging transport to meetings, or sick visiting. Groups are sometimes held in Sheltered Housing accommodation and members may help in local schools or with local charities.

Republic of Ireland

There are no U3As, as such, although a national movement called the Federation of Active Retirement Associations (FARA) has an approach which is very similar to the self-help U3A model. FARA members organize weekly programs of educational, cultural and sporting activities directed towards making retirement a purposeful, enjoyable phase of life and fostering a spirit of enterprise, independence and dignity. There are more than 76 affiliated associations with a total membership in excess of 7500. Most are in the Greater Dublin Area but the greatest development in recent years has been in the Provinces. An intergenerational project called Agelink has been devised by FARA to create better understanding between local school children and older people in Association branches. (Data on older adult education in the Republic of Ireland were provided by Maureen Keane.)

Japan

The educational gap between older and younger generations is currently quite wide. However, despite limited opportunities, many senior citizens retain an interest in learning new things, particularly those which can help them adapt to rapid social changes.

Since the latter half of the 1960s local boards of education and kominkans (citizen's public halls) have provided increased educational opportunities specifically for the aging, through the development of "universities for the aged".

Inamino Gakuen, a university for the aged founded by Hyogo Prefectural Boards of Education in 1969, has its own teachers, campus, and buildings. Originally the students were expected to graduate after one year. However, in response to requests from students to continue their learning, four year courses and graduate courses were set up. The Students' Council joins the management of the university in promoting extra-curricular activities.

There are also many independent universities for the aging. Izumi Kenro Daigaku (daigaku means university), which is located in the southern part of Osaka Prefecture is maintained by volunteers and has two-year courses and graduate courses. The elderly learn about problems of the aging, politics and economics, philosophy of religion, the Constitution and human rights, social welfare, history, and a range of arts and crafts courses. All students enrol in the general culture course and choose special electives. There are similar independent universities for the aging in Tokyo, Kobe, Kyoto and other areas.

Although many professors are involved with these initiatives, regular universities do not provide facilities of the kind seen in the French U3A model. Nevertheless, increasing numbers of older people are participants in university extension courses. The average life span has increased rapidly in Japan and the aging want to learn how to live. In addition, the number of younger people has decreased. Both these demographic features are stimulating universities' interest in adult education and the establishment of centres for lifelong learning on campus.

Those who have some special talent are trained as tutors or facilitators of social and cultural activities sponsored by local boards of education and subsidized by the Ministry of Education. Since 1989 prefectural colleges for the elderly, which train leaders of community activities, have been supported by the central government. Those who completed these courses are expanding independent study circles whose members teach and learn with each other.

The proportion of better educated people who join the ranks of the elderly is increasing. A combination of all these factors could well stimulate the development of the U3A approach in Japan. (Data on the Japanese U3As were provided by Takamichi Uesugi.)

New Zealand

U3A is quite new in New Zealand. The first group was established in Auckland in June 1989. Since then it has spread throughout the country but few groups have been going more than two years. Each group is independent and is modelled on the U.K. self-help approach. Accordingly, the groups remain responsive to the needs of the local community. Although the courses are basically educational, the great majority are run in private homes so groups tend to be small and friendly, and participants get to know each other well. About 15 is the preferred class size. Some of the more popular classes may attract 20 or more, however, not many homes can accommodate such large groups in comfort. The study program is flexible and covers a wide variety of teaching and learning styles and preferences. Some courses are academically quite demanding, others are more of a recreational nature. In addition to the regular academic program many groups hold monthly general meetings in suitable halls, and these often feature an invited speaker. The group meetings are popular and well attended, and help build a sense of belonging to a diverse and growing organization. (Data on the U3As in New Zealand were provided by John Stewart.)

North America

U.S.A.

No current information about U3As in the United States could be obtained for this paper. Despite being introduced to San Diego in 1975 the U3A movement, as such, has not struck a responsive chord with aging Americans. Part of the reason for this can, perhaps, be attributed to the wide range of competing, professionally organised programs. The internationally known Elderhostel program, which also began in 1975, and a number of other large programs having many elements in common with both the French and British models of U3A are described by Knox (1993), and Moskow-McKenzie and Manheimer (1993).

One of the best known and fastest growing of the programs for older North Americans, and one which fits comfortably with the U3A philosophy, is the Institutes for Learning in Retirement (ILRs) program.

The first ILR began in 1962 in New York city, but it was not until the early 1980s that the idea spread rapidly. There are currently about 180 ILRs in the United States and Canada, dedicated to meeting the personal development (as opposed to the vocational development) needs of older adults.

ILRs share features in common with both U3A models. Like many U3As in Europe, Network ILRs must be sponsored by an institute of higher education. However, like U3As in anglophone countries, the philosophical emphasis is on member ownership of the organization.

A typical ILR study group might involve 35 retired people gathering in a college classroom to study, for example, the writings of John Steinbeck. Classes meet once a week and run for two hours. Most are led by unpaid volunteer members, although a minority of programs from the host campus involve paid faculty members. There are no quizzes, grades, credits or prior qualification barriers. Fees range from about \$15/year to several hundred dollars, depending primarily on the level of support provided by the host campus, and the level of tuition provided by paid teachers.

There is no single model for ILRs. Each is created by a unique group of people, sponsored by a host campus which has its own special character, mission and way of functioning in a particular community. Despite this diversity ILRs share common goals of developing college level, intellectually stimulating educational courses, and fostering social growth through meetings, field trips and the like. The organization has an outward-looking focus and is heavily involved in community service activities. (Data on the U.S. U3As were provided by Jim Verschueren.)

Canada.

In addition to the rapidly growing ILR movement outlined in the U.S.A. section, Canada has a small number of U3A groups in French-speaking universities, affiliated with AIUTA. Although these tend to be quite academic they adopt a variety of ways of providing educational opportunities for older learners. For example, at the Academie de Gérontologie de l'Outaouais in Hull, learning activities for the aging include: self-help approaches; provision by universities for older people to freely use university facilities such as libraries, conferences and the normal lecture program, but with no awards; special courses and lectures for older people with or without awards; and, special curricula for older people, leading to an award. (Data on the Canadian U3As were provided by Bernard Dumouchel and translated by Françoise Louis.)

South America

Argentina.

Following the pioneering work at the National University of Entre Rios, which established a department specifically for Middle and Third Age learners, nine universities in Argentina have organised U3As structured along French model lines. Participants who take part in these programs are motivated by a desire to gain new knowledge which had been denied them in earlier years, the need to develop new relationships, and a desire for a sense of purpose in life. The programs tend to follow traditional university guidelines of teaching, service and research although, to date, little emphasis has been placed on research into the life-conditions of Third Age people. Research into ways of bettering Third Age life conditions is seen to be an area in which U3As in Argentina might play a growing role. (Data on the Argentine U3As were provided by Yolanda Darrieux de Nux.)

Other South American countries.

Little detail is available about U3A approaches in the remainder of the South American continent. U3As following the French model exist in Venezuela (2), Brazil (3), Chili (1), Colombia (1), Uruguay (15), Ecuador (1), Mexico (1) and the Dominican Republic (1). U3As following the British model exist in Bolivia (1), Brazil (2), Ecuador (1), Paraguay (3), and Argentina (1). (Data were provided by Françoise Louis.)

Discussion

During the past two decades there has been a rapid change in both the status and number of educational opportunities for older adults. Knox (1993) and Laslett (1989) draw on a number of demographic and cultural factors which help to explain probable reasons for this. The most obvious of these is the rapidly increasing population of older people, the majority of whom are living longer and in better health than earlier cohorts. Less obvious, but probably no less

important, is the steadily increasing levels of formal education amongst the older population; prior education has consistently been shown to be the single best predictor of future participation in adult education (Anderson & Darkenwald, 1979). Together these factors suggest that interest by older adults in intellectually challenging activities, of the kind offered by U3A, will continue their strong growth.

Two quite different approaches to U3A have evolved. These have been successfully introduced into many countries, either in their original forms, or with modifications to suit prevailing conditions. In some places the French model, involving close liaison with universities, seems vulnerable to external influences which, in the past, have caused many excellent adult education ideas to fail. These influences often are related to financial, or external policy, changes. For example, during recent years, monetarist policies have placed more of the onus on universities to supplement their dwindling revenue sources, thereby forcing substantial changes in university practice. Many universities currently place far more emphasis than they may have done in the past, on "user-pays" activities like consultancies and adult/continuing education courses. In France and Belgium this trend may explain why some universities have broadened U3A curricula in order to attract a wider client group, and renamed U3As as "Leisure" or "Free Time" Universities to reflect the changed emphasis. Participants now pay much more for university adult education services than they did in the past and this, in turn, may further influence curriculum change.

Many adult education programs are highly vulnerable to political change. Knox (1993) refers to an extreme example in China where, during the years of chaos between 1966 and 1976, adult education programs came to a standstill. Currently, U3A fees in China are low, in part because U3As are supported by local and national government, and social associations. Removal of subsidies could leave Chinese U3As in a parlous situation, although there is no suggestion that this might occur.

Regardless of country, it is those with limited incomes who will be the most disadvantaged by moves away from subsidized adult education programs, and towards user-pays. Therefore, programs for the aging, which are resistant to the vagaries of external policy and funding change, would seem to be preferable to those which depend on the resources and/or good will of others. U3As which follow the self-help approach appear to be excellent models of the kind of adult education program which can minimize the effects of adverse factors which are beyond the influence of the organization itself. For example, in the U.K., Portugal, Spain, New Zealand, Australia and a number of other countries, self-help U3As have grown rapidly in the last two or three years. This growth has coincided with what is widely regarded as the worst global recession since the 1930s.

Self-help U3As do not have to rely on paid Second Age experts working from expensive premises. By and large, members do everything for themselves. However, many self-help U3As undoubtedly receive hidden subsidies such as free, or heavily discounted premises like community halls, public libraries, school classrooms and the like, from which classes are run and the organizations are managed. Even if such subsidies were removed, in all likelihood many of the poorest members could continue to derive intellectual and social benefit from U3As because many courses are currently, and would likely continue to be, offered from members' homes.

New directions for U3A

For a number of years the International Association of U3As, AIUTA, has represented Third Age education on UNESCO, the Council of Europe and other international bodies. AIUTA was established in 1975 to link the rapidly growing U3A movement, however, despite its international title, AIUTA has only recently officially recognized the validity of U3As which were not linked with universities. In 1993 membership of the Governing Board was extended to include representation from The Netherlands, Austria, Finland, Germany and Great Britain and some of its business is now conducted in languages other than French.

This rapprochement has been made possible because differences between the university-led academic model and the independent self-help model are no longer as distinct as they once were. Over the years, European U3As have developed inter-generational membership, a wider range of activities including physical and social activities, and members themselves are playing a greater part in the choice and range of their activities. An element of pragmatism may also underpin the liberalizing of the AIUTA charter. In an address to the AIUTA General Assembly in September 1993, the president, Jacques Lefèvre, stated "The role of AIUTA is not to make things change faster but to link together what already exists, to help institutions to continue -- sometimes to survive -- and to help others to get started."

Now that the U3A movement is so widespread, and growing so quickly, it seems timely for an influential, well-organized body to seek to represent all U3A-like organizations. Once it becomes a truly representative body AIUTA's presence on international committees will be important for helping keep education in later life on the political agenda, and assisting in raising the status of the aging.

Better communications between U3As nationally and internationally could also substantially benefit individual members by increasing the range of intellectually challenging options open to them. An example of how a large well-organized network can help both individuals and smaller groups is found in the North American ILRs' network. The joint ILRs and Elderhostel network provides a range of services including: a national newsletter; state and regional conferences; international programs; a shared mailing list of over 600,000 older learners; technical assistance; curriculum sharing; and, a national information center which reports on innovative practices.

A further example is found in the U.K. where the Third Age Trust network has been instrumental in the extremely rapid development of the U3A movement. Within this network are eight National Subject Networks which coordinate expertise in areas like Oral History, Art and Music, Science and Technology, and so forth. This cooperative approach allows the expertise of a few members to benefit many.

A recent innovation in the U.K. highlights how U3A expertise can also benefit the wider community. The Interpreters' and Translators' Network uses the linguistic skills of British U3A members to translate documents for non profit-making organizations which are seeking to make European links. Now that fax, telephone and electronic mail communications are so inexpensive, using U3A expertise in this way could readily be extended as an international venture, perhaps coordinated through AIUTA. Activities of this nature would do much to enhance the image and status of the elderly.

A research role for U3As.

Laslett (1989) discussed the desirability of third-agers undertaking research on the process of aging in society. This idea seems admirably suited to the U3A ideal. Many U3A members

have degrees, or other qualifications which would enable them to attract outside funding for suitable projects initiated and run entirely by U3A members, or in association with professional researchers. Moreover, since U3As are geographically widespread, a U3A research network (if it could be established) could assist with gaining access to local, national and international data, in rural and urban settings, far more easily and cheaply than "conventional" means.

A project completed in 1994 by a U3A research group in the city of Brisbane exemplifies the kind of applied research activity which U3A members could easily carry out for the benefit of the wider ageing population. The U3A research group telephoned or wrote to as many clubs or organizations as possible, in the area, to obtain information about the types of leisure activities they provided which might be of interest to older people. Many of the organisations contacted had budgets which were too limited to advertise their activities or pay for a formal telephone listing. The outcome was a computer database and directory of addresses, activities and telephone contacts of a large number of organizations summarized in a publication entitled "Active Ageing". Substantial government funding was subsequently made available to cover the printing and distribution costs for older residents of the city.

Brief details of a number of other Australian U3A initiated research projects, or joint projects with other researchers, have been described elsewhere (Swindell, 1993). It is likely that many other examples of U3A research could be found in other countries, but, the information is difficult to obtain. Caro and Bass (in this issue) provide further support for the idea that older people can play a significant role in applied social research activities.

Conclusion

Within the limits of this journal article it has not been possible to discuss, in any detail, many of the intriguing ideas which are suggested by the U3A approach to adult education. Implicit reference only has been made to the important issue of how U3As are overcoming most of the structural barriers to educational participation which exclude many older adults. There has been no room for discussion of issues like: elitism and U3As; the characteristics and aspirations of the individual members; or, of the possibilities for U3A employing distance education approaches using new communications technologies. The important idea that more U3A members might participate in the stimulating and intellectually challenging pursuit of research could only be raised in passing.

Despite these limitations the various descriptions of U3As by country, paint a picture of a dynamic, flexible, accessible adult education movement which is meeting the wants and needs of rapidly growing numbers of older adults. One of the movement's greatest strengths is its grassroots' autonomy. Even in countries where national or State organizations exist, little or no attempt is made to impose direction, and decisions at the individual organization level remain where they rightfully belong, with the members. U3A evolved because existing societal structures did not recognize, or could not provide for the changing needs of new generations of older people. Today's older people are better educated than earlier cohorts, and are better equipped to seek the information they need, and are more confident in articulating their wants and needs. Patronizing hobby courses and bingo may well remain an option for some. However, it is organizations like U3A, which emphasize intellectual growth in a social environment, which are most likely to be sought after by successively better educated older generations.

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Footnotes

¹ Different names are used in different countries and, sometimes, within one country, to refer to the University of the Third Age. To minimize reader confusion, this paper uses the name University of the Third Age and the acronym U3A instead of terms which may be preferred in other countries.

² A concise and easily accessible paper by Radcliffe (1982) provides substantial details in English of the early successes of French U3As. Details of papers published in the French language may be obtained from AIUTA, Sentier du Gorla 8-10, B - 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.