

New directions, opportunities and challenges for New Zealand U3As

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Abstract

U3A (University of the Third Age) has grown rapidly in New Zealand since its introduction in 1989 and now boasts a membership in excess of 4200. However, a number of social changes, brought about by a combination of population ageing, changing immigration patterns and higher average education levels, point to the need for vigilance by U3A leaders if the movement is to avoid becoming marginal to the interests of new retirees. Administrators of U3As in New Zealand and Australia were surveyed to determine their visions for the future and preparedness for change. The movement appears to be well equipped to manage social change, with leaders expressing interest in new activities involving greater interactivity and communication between U3As, research, and use of new technologies. A newly developed Internet service for U3A members in New Zealand and Australia is discussed. U3AOnline provides a range of resources for U3A members in both countries, including the novel Isolated Bytes (IB) site. IB is the first U3A without walls and offers isolated older people, regardless of geographical location, an opportunity to take part in intellectually challenging online courses written and taught by U3A members.

Historically, leisure organisations have been central to the lives of many New Zealanders. For the growing population of older persons in particular, clubs and voluntary groups are likely to continue to play an important role. This is because these organisations can help to strengthen or renew social networks which, in later life, are increasingly subject to abrupt disruption by events like retirement, relocation, divorce, or death of close friends. Research findings over the past two decades point consistently to a relationship between older people's support networks and well-being (Bowling, 1994).

The majority of leisure organisations for older people are largely or entirely self-funded, therefore their promotion within the community would be an inexpensive and seemingly desirable social strategy. However, society is changing very rapidly. Many of the leisure pursuits that appealed to our retired parents no longer exist or, if they still do, they have changed substantially in order to cater for evolving expectations. A recent study of leisure organisations found that the once popular bingo and social clubs that flourished a few years ago, may have reached their use-by date (Swindell & Mayhew, 1998). Today's third agers are more outgoing and active than those of a generation ago (McCallum & Geiselhart, 1996) and they seek different things from their retirement. Similarly, future cohorts of third agers almost certainly will have different expectations of their leisure organisations. Organisations that fail to adapt appear destined to meet the same fate as the sewing circles of our grandparents' time.

The University of the Third Age (U3A) is one of the most successful of the new leisure groups for retired people. By any measure U3A is an impressive adult education enterprise. Since it was introduced to New Zealand in 1989 U3A has grown rapidly, particularly in the North Island. By 1999, 36 groups were providing a wide variety of intellectually challenging courses for more than 4200 older New Zealanders. For some reason the movement has yet to gain a substantial foothold in the South Island - details of only two groups are known there. Heppner (1994) has described the U3A philosophy and the genesis of the movement in New Zealand.

The thrust of this article is to argue that, as a leisure organisation U3A in New Zealand is, and is likely to continue to be, subject to quite rapidly changing social pressures. Many of these pressures may be predictable, at least to some extent and, provided U3A adapts, it should remain important in the lives of future ageing cohorts.

Demographic trends and their possible influence on U3A's role in New Zealand

Rapid population ageing

Throughout the twentieth century the average age of the population has steadily increased. Almost every country is currently experiencing a rapid rise in the number and proportion of people over the age of 60 and this trend is projected to increase throughout the next few decades (Brink, 1997). The growth of the ageing New Zealand population is shown in Table 1 (Cook, 1997).

In general, Table 1 shows that there has been a marked increase in the longevity of older New Zealanders in the past few years, with the increase for females being greater than that for males. Moreover, of all population sub groups the fastest growth is found amongst those over the age of 80. For example, today's average 85 year old female can expect to live for another 6.3 years, which is about 1.5 years longer than the average 85 year old female of her mother's generation. Purely on the basis of

population statistics, it seems reasonable to forecast that interest in U3A activities will continue to grow.

Table 1: Years of life remaining at exact age

	Age	1950	1970	1994
Male	65	12.8	12.6	15.4
	75	7.6	7.4	9.3
	85	3.9	4.0	5.0
Female	65	14.8	16.0	19.0
	75	8.5	9.3	11.8
	85	4.2	4.7	6.3

Countries like New Zealand that are experiencing a surge in average life expectancy are entitled to engage in a measure of self-congratulation. After all, population ageing is surely the ultimate reward for the substantial investments in education, science, technology, and other related programs which, directly or indirectly, have led to rapid improvements in the general population's quality of life and well being. Science and technology have played major contributory roles to population ageing by minimising or eliminating many former causes of premature death. So too have formal and informal education programs. Growing numbers of people understand the importance of sensible diet, regular exercise, moderating their intake of alcohol, not smoking, and many other individual lifestyle choices that are directly associated with good health and, apparently, longevity.

However, a cautionary note is warranted. The funding for welfare programs comes from taxation, and population ageing is accompanied by a decline in the proportion of the population in the paid work force. Therefore, it is no longer realistic to believe that a diminishing proportion of the population in work will be able to fully fund the programs that will be needed to assist growing numbers of individuals requiring support. Inevitably, retired people, despite having fixed or limited incomes, will be asked to pay more for services. A likely consequence is that growing numbers of older people will actively seek out leisure activities that don't make heavy demands on their savings, yet contribute in a material way to their quality of life.

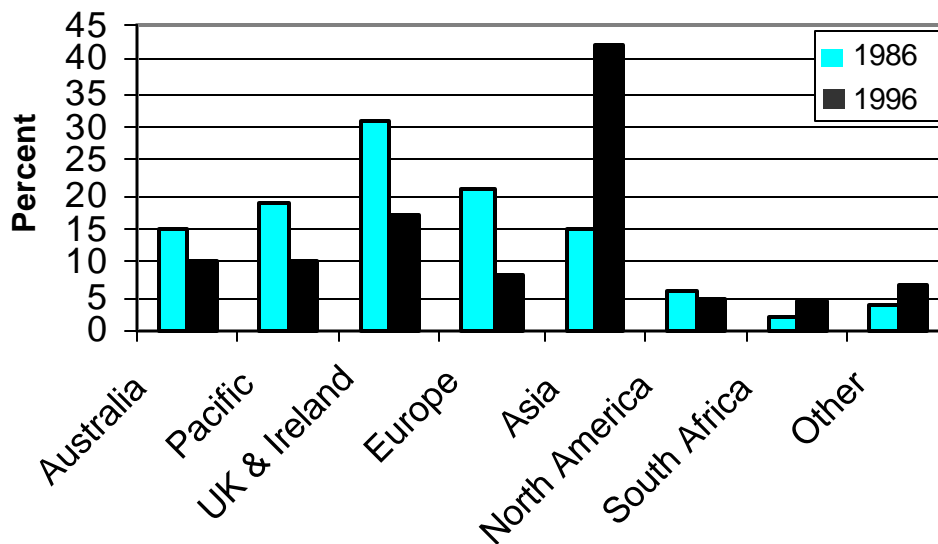
Recent studies suggest that older individuals may be able to improve, or at least maintain, aspects of their health through intellectual stimulation. Langer (1989) is an advocate of this position. In summarising the pool of evidence which appears to support her view, Langer was moved to '...make the strong claim that the body begins to die as the mind ceases to deal with novelty' (p. 142). More recently, in reviewing evidence that indicates that education may protect against dementia, Orrell and Sahakian (1995) suggested that adult education programs and stimulating mental activity might help in the development of coping skills and strategies for solving problems. In turn these may help to offset the cognitive affects of normal ageing and delay the clinical symptoms associated with diseases such as Alzheimer's. If this were true, the finding would be of significant economic importance. Katzman (1995) observed that the economic cost of caring for demented older persons in the United

States is over 100 billion dollars a year and that merely by introducing a 5-year delay in the onset of symptoms would halve the number of dementia patients. He suggested that the discovery of activities that delay the onset of dementia would likely have the same consequences as the discovery that diet and exercise delayed the onset of cardiovascular disease in older individuals. He further speculated that if engagement in specific social or leisure activities in later life is found to delay the onset of dementia, there would be a reasonable biological basis for this: rodents exposed to stimulating environments increased their levels of cognition and brain weight. A recent study emanating from Auckland University (Young, Lawlor, Leone, Dragunow & During, 1999) showed that mental stimulation encourages new brain cell growth in adult rats and makes the brain more resistant to ageing and injury. The authors speculate from their findings that these characteristics may be common to all mammals. If so, they may guard against Alzheimer's and similar degenerative diseases. Educational attainment may also be directly related to health in later life. Guralnik, Land, Blazer, Fillenbaum and Branch (1993) found that educational attainment has a strong influence on total life expectancy and active life expectancy among both blacks and whites. They described their finding as being of great importance because 'education level, and socioeconomic status in general, are alterable risk factors' (p. 115). In addition to the possibility that a link exists between mental stimulation and late life health and well-being, a consistent inverse relationship between social support and mortality and morbidity (Cohen & Syme, 1985) has also been found, although, once again, the causal variables are not well understood.

U3As provide members with extremely inexpensive opportunities both for mental and social stimulation. Provided that U3As continue to present a forward-looking image to the ageing community, the self-help U3A approach appears to be tailor-made as the kind of organisation that will continue to contribute quality of life opportunities for older New Zealanders.

Changing immigration patterns

Fig 1: Birthplace of New Immigrants 1986 and 1996

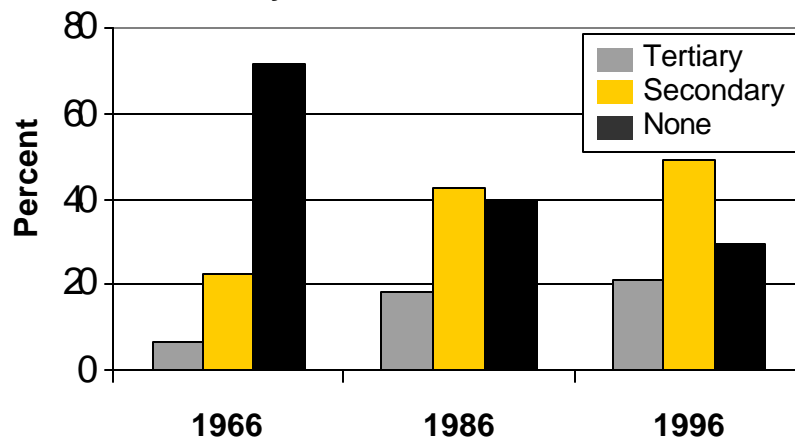


Significant changes in the birthplace distribution of new immigrants in recent years are also playing a part in the process of social evolution. Figure 1 shows the birthplace distribution of new immigrants to New Zealand in 1986 and 1996 (Cook, 1997).

Although New Zealand is increasingly becoming a multicultural society, observations of U3As here and in Australia suggest that the movement currently is composed predominantly of white, middle class members. One of U3As greatest attributes is its seeming egalitarianism. The movement has demolished many of the traditional barriers to participation that characterise a number of adult education programs for older people. For example, there are no entry requirements or examinations, costs are minimal, classes are held in convenient low cost, accessible locations at times that suit participants, and so on. However, there appear to be other barriers to participation confronting older people from different ethnic backgrounds. In multicultural New Zealand, why is there not a more representative mix of cultures amongst the membership? Perhaps the aims and ideals of the movement are not yet sufficiently well known in the wider ageing community. Perhaps U3A is seen by some as a closed, elitist organisation. Perhaps there may be social barriers or cultural nuances beyond the ken of U3A administrators who are interested in widening the membership base. Whatever the reasons, it seems most unlikely that older people from other cultures are just not interested in programs of intellectual challenge within a socially stimulating environment. For example, Asians traditionally have a love of, and respect for education. As shown in Figure 1, during the past ten years Asia has replaced the United Kingdom and Ireland as the largest source of new immigrants, suggesting that the New Zealand identity will continue to evolve with growing Asian influences. It takes no great stretch of imagination to appreciate how older Asians could enrich the New Zealand U3A movement. They could make substantial contributions to U3A courses in language, cooking, history and politics, to name a few. The same argument holds for the Maori, Pacific Islanders, and people from other cultures, whose rich heritages could add greatly to the range of intellectually and socially challenging experiences for all members. How to make the organisation more representative of the multicultural New Zealand population appears to be an important challenge for U3A administrators.

Increased education levels

Fig 2: Percentage of NZ Population Aged 15-24 by Educational Qualification



Population-based participation studies consistently find a strong positive correlation between level of formal education attained and participation in adult education activities (Clark, 1983). It seems that those who have already gained from the education system are the ones who seek additional educational opportunities. Thus, an indication of whether an ageing population might continue in the future to be attracted to cognitively challenging activities can be gained from examining the educational backgrounds of the younger population. Figure 2 shows census data for educational qualifications of young New Zealanders in 1966, 1986 and 1996 (Cook, 1997).

The most striking feature of Figure 2 is the sharp decline over recent years in the percentage of young people with no educational qualifications. In 1966 more than 70% of young people had left secondary school by the minimum leaving age, presumably to enter the work force. By 1996, this figure had dropped to less than 30%. The sharp decline is mirrored in the rise in young people today who complete high school (nearly 50%). The proportion completing tertiary studies has risen from about 6% to 21% in the same 30-year period.

Today's third agers were children during the depression and pre World War 2 era, when education was very much a luxury. Very few parents could afford to educate their children beyond the minimum. If the correlation between prior educational attainment and participation in adult education holds true, and provided that U3A continues to evolve to meet the expectations of future ageing cohorts, the movement appears to be headed for boom times.

The importance of flexible and visionary management in U3As

In a study of leisure organisations for older people Swindell and Mayhew (1998) argued that the viability of these organisations was related to management's capacity to recognise and adapt to social change. Many leisure organisations for older people are heavily reliant upon volunteer leadership. It appears to be particularly important that managers have sufficient flexibility and vision to tailor their programs to the evolving interests of members, and to excite the interests of would-be members, particularly new retirees. Organisations run by managers who persist with the old ways of doing things are unlikely to prosper.

In 1997 a questionnaire surveying voluntarism, teaching, administration, and visions for U3As' future was sent to all known U3A groups in New Zealand (n=20) and Australia (n=120). Estimated completion time was about one hour. Administrators from 12 New Zealand groups (70%) and 84 Australian groups (67%) responded. This was a good return in light of the detailed nature of the questionnaire.

U3As in New Zealand are growing strongly. Most are characterised by a sense of vitality and dynamism and many offer new courses such as introductory computing, and the use of email and the Internet. This suggests that U3A administrators do not see themselves or their members as belonging to some sheltered backwater organisation, remote from the pressures of a rapidly changing life. It also suggests that U3A administrators possess high levels of managerial expertise and experience and, perhaps, that these attributes may have been carried over from their Second Age working lives. To determine whether this might have been so, participants were asked to name or describe the occupations that current major office bearers (president, vice president, secretary, treasurer) had held immediately before their retirement (e.g. carpenter, small business owner, accountant, home-maker, teacher etc.) The diverse

occupations were then grouped into one of four major categories, namely professional, trade, home-maker and business. As speculated, a large majority of the key office bearers formerly held professional positions requiring higher education qualifications. In 1997, 91% of New Zealand U3A office bearers formerly worked in the professions; the Australian equivalent was 75%. Additionally, before their retirement, many held management and other positions of responsibility. If this high level of managerial expertise remains a characteristic of U3As of the future, the organisation appears to be well placed to adapt to social change and to remain relevant to the lives of new cohorts of retired people.

Table 2 Possibilities for the future of U3A

In the future ...	NZ (n=14)	Aust (n=84)
1. U3As will have difficulty attracting volunteer administrators	2.7	2.5
2. U3As may need to pay an administrator	3.7	3.3
3. payment for some administrative services would undermine the self-help nature of U3As	2.1	2.3
4. U3As will help in libraries, art galleries, museums etc.	3.2	2.6
5. U3As will carry out research relevant to the wider Third Age population	2.6	2.2
6. U3As will need to attract under-represented groups	2.6	2.3
7. U3As will use distance education methods to help mentally alert frail elderly and isolated older people	2.8	2.3
8. U3As will pay outside experts to run some specialist courses	3.4	3.8
9. U3As will pay for specialist teaching facilities	3.4	3.1
10. governments should be asked to provide funding to help U3As to develop	3.5	2.4
11. there will be growing technological demands on older people	2.4	1.8
12. there will be fewer jobs therefore younger members of U3A	2.1	2.0
13. members' interests will differ from today's	3.1	2.5
14. there will be more emphasis on retired people helping themselves	2.0	2.0
15. there will be greater communication and sharing resources between U3As	2.1	2.1
16. U3As will run more activities away from home base eg educational travel	2.5	2.1
17. members should pay considerably more for higher level of service	3.6	3.5
18. a centralised "clearing house" for borrowing resources would assist U3As	2.6	2.0

In order to provide a "snapshot" of how administrators reacted in 1997 to a number of scenarios that have the potential to influence their specific groups, as well as the U3A movement in general, participants were asked to respond to 18 futures-oriented statements. For each question they were asked to tick one of 5 options, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Responses were then coded from 1 to 5 (1 for strongly agree, to 5 for strongly disagree) and averaged. The results are summarised in Table 2. For comparison, results from 84 Australian groups are included.

In Table 2, average responses on a five-point scale are shown for each country. Lower numbers that cluster around 1.5 to 2.5, on average indicate that respondents agreed with a statement; responses clustered around 3 were neutral; and higher numbers show that respondents disagreed with a statement.

Items 1, 2, 3, 8 and 10 relate to the self-help philosophy that underpins the U3A movement in both countries. With the exception of item 10 average responses were similar for both countries. Item 10 was a notable exception in that it appears to show that Australian U3As were supportive of the idea of governments providing funding to help U3As to develop, whereas New Zealand U3As opposed the idea. However, in this case, averages give a distorted picture of the Australian position because the majority of groups in five of seven Australian states opposed this idea. The exceptions were the two southern mainland states of Victoria (1.9) and South Australia (1.8) whose responses were significantly different from the other states [$F(6,91)=4.72$, $p < .001$]. The large number of responding groups from Victoria ($n=34$), almost all of which were very supportive, skewed the Australian average towards apparent national support for item 10. A possible explanation for the strong support shown by U3As in Victoria may be attributed to the effective communications which exist between U3As there and their past successes with attracting one-off funding for special projects. Shortly after U3A began in Victoria in 1984 a strong U3A network developed. Currently, 60 of 63 U3As in Victoria belong to the network. These groups meet regularly to discuss U3A matters, including applying for occasional government grants for educational purposes. Because of their success in attracting one-off grants most U3As in Victoria appear to be comfortable with the idea that external funding can be used to aid self-help education and this need not be detrimental to the U3A philosophy. Similarly, in South Australia, communications between the U3A groups are good, although no formal network exists. Most South Australian groups have been recipients of "Small Grants to Seniors" funding from government and this could also help to explain their strong support for item 10. A number of other groups in Australia and New Zealand have also been recipients of government or other grants, and they too responded positively to item 10. Clearly, many U3As are comfortable with the notion that occasional financial assistance is not incompatible with their organisational goals.

Added support for the idea that occasional grants are not necessarily irreconcilable with the self-help U3A philosophy can be drawn from recent United Kingdom examples. In 1997, the Third Age Trust, which is the national network of U3As in the United Kingdom, was awarded a grant from proceeds of the national lottery of nearly 300,000 pounds to aid U3A developments there. Individual U3As in the UK have also been successful in attracting specific purpose grants from the lottery to assist with purchasing teaching resources and equipment such as computers. The self-help movement evolved in the UK and most U3As there remain very staunch advocates of the self-help model, rather than of one that involves a dependence on university or other Second Age teachers. New Zealand groups and their Australian counterparts

that are opposed to external grants yet, at the same time, recognise a need to overcome problems that are hindering their progress, may wish to reflect on their understanding of the self-help philosophy. It may well be that too rigid an interpretation of “self-help” may be disadvantageous to members' interests.

Research conducted by U3As

A number of groups from both countries strongly supported the item 5 notion that U3As will carry out research relevant to the wider Third Age population. The desirability of third-agers undertaking research was proposed by Laslett (1989), one of the original founders of the self-help movement. Indeed, one of 19 fundamental guiding principles of the self-help movement states that “every member will be expected where possible to have a research project of his or her own, and to write up its results” (p. 179).

It is probably fortunate that this principle was neither well known nor enforced within U3As, particularly during the movement's early years of rapid community acceptance. By its nature research is an exclusive activity. Almost certainly, a research requirement would have substantially changed the broadly based membership profile which, as an earlier study showed, included people from very diverse educational backgrounds, a majority of whom were women (Swindell, 1993). Although that study showed that Australian U3As attracted mainly middle-class people with above average levels of education for their age group, 17 per cent of members had received two years or less of secondary schooling as their highest formal education background. The majority of this latter group were aged 75 and older. It would have been a very considerable loss to adult education, and indeed to society as a whole, if self-help U3As had evolved in a way that tended to exclude very old people and others with limited formal educational experience. An organisationally imposed barrier to participation, such as an expectation that U3A members would become involved with research, would probably have created the perception in the minds of many older learners that they were not “qualified enough” for U3A. Even though Laslett's (1989) vision was for U3A to be an egalitarian organisation it seems likely that a research requirement would have curtailed U3A to such an extent that it became an elitist club for quite small numbers of academically advantaged, predominantly male, retired people.

Nevertheless, the idea of U3As having a formal research elective as just one of many intellectually stimulating options available to members, is an intriguing idea. Although there have been no large studies of New Zealand U3A membership characteristics, the high levels of managerial expertise discussed earlier suggest that the organisation attracts a substantial proportion of highly qualified, retired people. If this is so U3As could doubtlessly find leaders who would value the idea of training and leading U3A research teams.

Although few U3As in New Zealand currently promote research, this is probably because the idea has not been widely discussed. Most U3A managers are occupied with the demands of day-to-day organisation, and research is not amongst the members' high priorities. However, the high level of support for item 5 suggests that research would be a timely topic for consideration. Community-based organisations like U3A would be able to provide substantial insights into local problem areas that affect the ageing community. Perhaps to begin with, visionary U3A administrators might wish to initiate some research and development activities that shed light on how

to attract older New Zealanders of colour and/or from non English-speaking backgrounds into their groups.

Some benefits deriving from networking

The positive response to item 15 implies that many New Zealand U3A leaders see advantages to strengthening links between their groups. One approach that might be of interest to New Zealand U3A organisers is the approach taken by The Third Age Trust in the UK. The Third Age Trust is an 'umbrella' organisation that facilitates links and provides a diverse range of educational opportunities for some 360 independent British U3As. Because New Zealand and the United Kingdom are approximately the same geographical area it is possible that some of The Third Age Trust programs could be adapted to suit New Zealand circumstances. For example, in addition to the normal suite of local U3A course offerings, the approximately 75,000 members in Great Britain may join one or more national Subject Networks. These include Arts, Birdwatching, Creative Writing, Genealogy, Languages, Science and Technology, Walking, and Travel. Each network has a national U3A coordinator and members communicate through their own subject newsletters or by the Internet. Often, members of the network travel to different places in the UK and meet for activities specific to their own interest group. For example, because the Travel network attracts members from all over the UK it is able to develop the critical mass needed to offer members a variety of stimulating visits at a discount price. An excerpt from a recent Travel network newsletter notes:

we have a happy link with U3A Australia travel enthusiasts. They join as associate members of our Travel Network and are sometimes able to combine a U3A study tour with a visit to the Old Country. It's also a pleasure to have phone calls from visitors from Australia ... looking for U3A travel opportunities.

The U3A travel enthusiasts referred to above are members of the 60 U3A groups in Victoria, which comprise the U3A Network Victoria Inc. For years this excellent communication network has provided its members with a range of educationally and socially stimulating opportunities that would not be possible within an isolated U3A. In all probability, members of U3As that have no systematic communications with other groups never get to hear about the opportunities that are open to members of U3A networks.

In 1999 the coordinator of the UK Languages Network wrote in an e-mail to members:

At the moment there are 610 language groups in the UK studying 19 different languages. Many of them already have links with groups abroad, independently of the Network, but recently I was able to link up two of our Latin groups with a Latin group in New Zealand.

These two examples illustrate how an outward-looking collegial approach can advantage many U3A members.

New communications technology and U3A

Despite a stated desire to work more closely with other U3As many groups in New Zealand and Australia are concerned by the implications of forming networks similar to those that exist in other countries. The major barriers to national linkages appear to relate to concerns that big city U3As will play a domineering role, or that networking will introduce unnecessary and expensive centralised procedures thereby

jeopardising the autonomy of individual campuses. Traditional State or city rivalries may also be involved.

New communications technologies provide previously unavailable means for facilitating communications and sharing resources between U3As without involving any of the barriers mentioned above. Item 11 shows that U3A leaders believe that technological demands on older people will grow. However, if electronic communications are to become effective within New Zealand U3As, the first question that must be answered is - are older New Zealanders interested in learning to use new computer-related technologies? This question cannot be answered directly because, as yet, no readily accessible data are available from population-based studies carried out in New Zealand. However, data from the USA provides some pointers. A 1998 survey to determine the influence of new communications technologies on older Americans showed that large numbers of older Americans are enthusiastically adopting new communications technologies. For example, the survey found that:

- 40% of adults in the USA aged 50 and older have a home computer. This number has grown rapidly from 29% in 1995;
- 70% of this group (over 13 million seniors) regularly use the Web for managing finances, accessing health information, entertainment and so forth; and,
- Seniors are the fastest growing group of Internet users.

These data say nothing about what may be happening with new technology uptake among older New Zealanders. However, they do show that many older people are not frightened off by new technology and, in fact, they become avid users once they see the benefits.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that New Zealander U3A members are experimenting with new technology. In 1997, nine of the 12 New Zealand groups responding to the U3A survey reported that requests from members for computer-related courses were growing rapidly. Increasing numbers of U3A members now own their own computers. In 1998, an email network called U3ANewZ was started and this medium has proven its worth as the first inexpensive and convenient communications channel between local U3As. Prior to the advent of U3ANewZ communications between most U3As was non-existent or, at best, sporadic and ad hoc. By mid 1999, 23 New Zealand groups and several from the UK and Australia were regularly exchanging ideas and news, or debating matters of interest via this medium.

It would appear that increasing numbers of New Zealand members are becoming accustomed to using the Internet. If the trend continues it requires no large leap of technological faith to envisage how U3As could use this convenient, inexpensive and non-intrusive medium to run courses at a distance for incapacitated members, or for people isolated by distance. Tutor expertise could also readily be shared electronically via an electronic U3A without walls. Members could electronically visit specialised programs run by U3A tutors from anywhere in the world. Course notes could be made available from the tutors' Home Pages on the World Wide Web, and student interaction could take place by e-mail or other formats that are easily supported by the Internet. The electronic sharing of resources in this way would help to address some of the problems that bedevil most U3A groups, such as too few tutors, difficulties with locating teaching venues, and a desire by some members to attend more courses of a rigorous academic nature.

U3A Online

The idea of an electronic U3A without walls has recently moved a step closer thanks to successful collaboration between U3A leaders in Australia and New Zealand in testing a concept called U3A Online. U3A Online was funded by the Australian Government as part of the 1999 International Year of Older Persons activities. Nominally, the grant was to provide Australian U3As with greater access to resources, and to offer isolated older Australians an opportunity to experience some of the benefits of belonging to a U3A. However, well established e-mail communication channels between U3A leaders in both countries, as well as with colleagues in the UK, have enabled the project to take a more global perspective.

One of the more innovative components of U3A Online is the electronic courses section for isolated older people, called Isolated Bytes (IB). Many older people experience social isolation for a number of reasons that are not necessarily related to distance. For example, more than half the Australian population aged over 65 reports some form of disability and these disabilities tend to become more severe with increasing age (ABS, 1998). In addition, many older people are caregivers for members of the family or friends and, as such, are constrained from everyday activities.

To test the IB concept, two 8-week courses were written by U3A volunteer tutors. One course was entitled Botany for Knowledge and Enjoyment and the other Writing Family History. The courses were developed electronically and placed on the IB site for access by isolated persons from different parts of Australia who were accepted into the initial intake. Interaction with tutor and between participants was by e-mail and electronic "forum" sites that allowed participants to carry out discussions and read each other's stories.

An initial course intake of 34 participants was selected from the then 78 members of IB. Participants were surveyed by questionnaire before and after the course and by telephone interview during the fourth and fifth weeks of their 8-week course.

In brief, the pilot program was highly successful and revealed the following;

- The majority of participants (72%) were women and most were aged over 65. This finding is surprising in light of surveys undertaken in Australia and elsewhere that show that women of all ages consistently lag behind their male age counterparts in uptake of computer-based technology;
- More than half lived in large cities but considered themselves isolated by circumstances like those described above;
- About 21% had minimal formal schooling, having left school at primary level or with some secondary school experience. This suggests that programs like IB may prove to be attractive to older people who were denied the opportunity in earlier life of continuing with their education;
- Nearly 24% were formerly from occupations not normally well represented in adult education programs like farming, the trades, homemaking and unskilled laboring. The remainder (76%) had been professionals, paraprofessionals or businesspersons during their working careers.

Other findings of interest from the study showed that the majority of participants:

- were eager for further knowledge, both course-specific and generally;

- had, by the end of the course, shown a preference for learning via the Internet, either fully or in combination with other methods;
- were interested in continuing with Internet learning either immediately or at some future date.

This pilot study demonstrates the great potential of the Internet for improving the quality of life of isolated older people regardless of where they live. A number of similar studies will soon begin in the UK, Canada, Germany and elsewhere, and evaluation data from these as well as from future IB courses will greatly improve our understanding of how older people react to learning via this medium.

An interesting extension proposed for the next round of IB courses will further test the practicability of the U3A without walls idea. One of the volunteer writers of a new group of IB courses is a U3A member in the UK. Her course, entitled Design for Living, will be offered to IB members in Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and elsewhere, thereby opening up new interactive possibilities for participants.

Apart from the IB program U3A Online offers a number of new resources and services to New Zealand U3As. These include:

- The Directory of Australia and New Zealand U3As, which contains addresses and other details of the 176 known U3As in Australasia. This resource allows visitors to the web page to search for U3As in a specific location. For example, an overseas U3A visitor planning a visit through the North Island can, for the first time, readily determine where U3As operate;
- The U3A News Items site, which reports on U3A happenings and events that might influence U3A operations. U3A members can submit news items themselves;
- The Calendar of U3A-Related Events, which can be searched by month or year for conferences, seminars, tours etc;
- The Useful Resources for U3As and Members site, which offers descriptions of resources and provides links to other web sites; and,
- The U3A Online Forum, which allows members to pursue a discussion on a particular topic or follow the thread of discussions carried out between other members.

These and other resources can be found by visiting U3A Online at <http://u3aonline.edna.edu.au/>

The above is not to imply that technology will replace face-to-face interaction. One of U3A's unknown, but probable major strengths is its role in fostering social networks amongst members. Social interaction is highly valued in U3As. Respondents to the survey of U3As in Australia and New Zealand rated having opportunities for social interaction with colleagues as the second most important of U3A's major accomplishments, behind intellectually challenging opportunities. Research findings over the past two decades point consistently to a relationship between elderly people's support networks and well-being. Bowling (1994) observed that fairly strong evidence exists for a relationship between social support, social network development, health status, mortality, and risk of entry into institutional care. For many older people whose well-being may have been jeopardised by events such

as retirement, relocation, divorce, or the death of a spouse or friend, organisations like U3A may provide important opportunities for re-establishing social networks.

Regardless of possible well-being implications, many U3A members clearly enjoy the opportunity of spending time in the company of lively, like-minded colleagues. The social implications of electronic networking are largely unknown. However it is difficult to believe that cyber space will provide an alternative to the kind of social networking so valued within U3A circles. For most U3A members programs like IB will probably be seen as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, their usual U3A programs.

A possible structural impediment to change

Question 12 in Table 2 shows that administrators believe that, in the future, there will be fewer jobs, therefore younger members joining U3A. If this should prove to be the case some New Zealand U3A administrators, particularly within larger cities, may face a dilemma. A number of New Zealand groups indicated that they would prefer to cap membership numbers at about 150 or 200. The reason for this is an untested belief that larger groups could lose the important aspect of friendship that is seen as being a distinguishing characteristic of close, tightly knit groups. For example, within the Auckland and immediate surrounding area, some 16 autonomous groups operate. The membership ceiling is one of several reasons for the existence of so many groups within a reasonably compact geographical region. As membership approaches the limit another group is started to serve a local geographical cluster. This pattern may also occur in the Wellington region.

The majority of Australian groups have fewer than 200 members. However, their membership numbers are not normally dictated by some arbitrarily imposed membership restriction. As is the case with many New Zealand groups they tend to be situated in smaller population centres and are unlikely to have experienced the same growth demands faced by groups in larger cities. A number of quite large groups operate very successfully in Australia. For example, the Directory of Australia and New Zealand (1999) shows 29 of 136 groups have memberships above 400 - four of these have memberships above 1000. In general, administrators of large groups consider the greater variety of courses and services that can be offered to their members to be an advantage. Despite their size social interaction is rated as an important attribute of these groups.

Setting aside the argument about whether small groups are preferable to large groups, administrators of groups with membership ceilings will need to consider where the new ideas and energy will come from to keep their organisations vibrant once the cap is reached. A possible long-term consequence of a static, ageing membership might be that these U3As may ultimately begin to resemble the currently unfashionable senior citizens groups, with declining memberships and few volunteers with the energy or interest to carry out the business of the organisation.

Conclusion

New Zealand's ageing population is projected to grow until at least the middle of next century. In addition, it seems likely that social services budgets will continue to decline in real terms, confronting policy makers with difficult decisions about how best to apportion scarce resources among the many needy sectors of society.

Helping people to take control of their lives is one of the most effective ways of enabling them to avoid dependence, which is costly both in social and economic terms. In the case of an ageing population, maximising opportunities for individuals to maintain their independence would seem to be one of the simplest, least expensive and socially most desirable strategies for the future. Self-help organisations like U3A are exemplars of the new wave of leisure organisations that thrive by valuing and utilising the knowledge, skills and abilities of retirees. The organisation is exclusively dependent on volunteers who benefit by continuing to use high level skills that were honed during their working lives. In turn, general members benefit by taking part in cognitively stimulating activities within a social environment. Research suggests that these attributes may be conducive to good health.

It may well be the case that the link between cognitive challenge and good health can never be unequivocally established. However, there can be little argument that older people who continue to engage in cognitively stimulating activities will be in a better position to adopt strategies that assist them to maximise their well-being and independence, than those who simply give up trying. U3A in New Zealand is growing rapidly but it will have to continue to move in new directions if it is to appeal to successive ageing cohorts. This paper has argued that U3A managers are receptive to change. Provided that this open-minded position is maintained, and provided that the organisation continues to remain accessible to new ageing cohorts, U3As appear set to continue as a growing force among the range of leisure options for older New Zealanders.

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Table 1: Years of life remaining at exact age

	Age	1950	1970	1994
Male	65	12.8	12.6	15.4
	75	7.6	7.4	9.3
	85	3.9	4.0	5.0
Female	65	14.8	16.0	19.0
	75	8.5	9.3	11.8
	85	4.2	4.7	6.3

Fig 1: Birthplace of New Immigrants 1986 and 1996

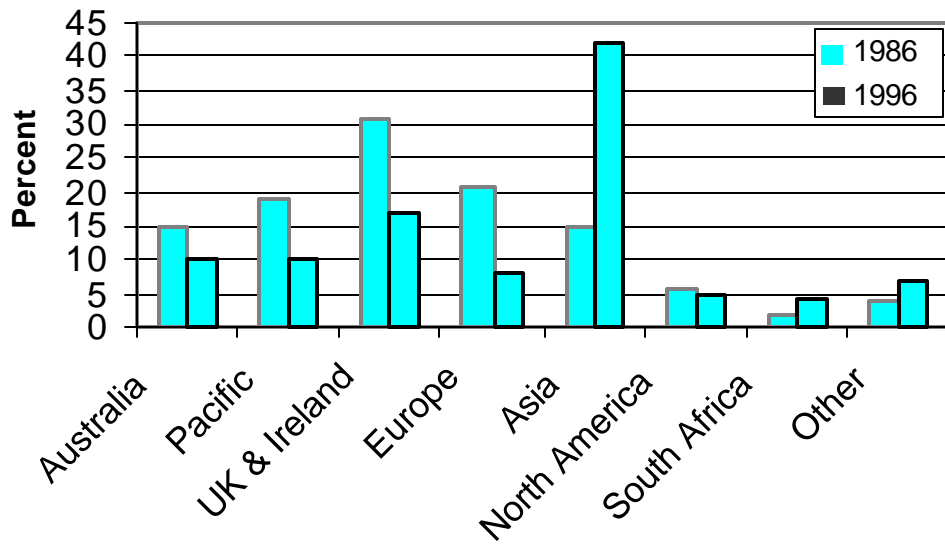


Fig 2: Percentage of NZ Population Aged 15-24 by Educational Qualification

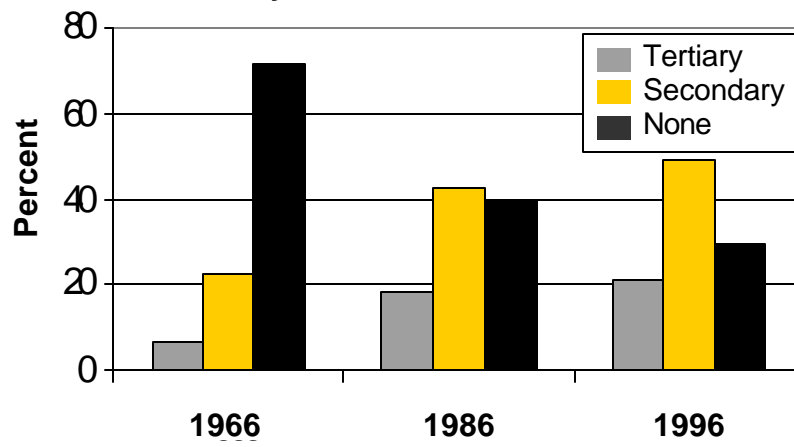


Table 2 Possibilities for the future of U3A

In the future ...	NZ (n=14)	Aust (n=84)
19. U3As will have difficulty attracting volunteer administrators	2.7	2.5
20. U3As may need to pay an administrator	3.7	3.3
21. payment for some administrative services would undermine the self-help nature of U3As	2.1	2.3
22. U3As will help in libraries, art galleries, museums etc.	3.2	2.6
23. U3As will carry out research relevant to the wider Third Age population	2.6	2.2
24. U3As will need to attract under-represented groups	2.6	2.3
25. U3As will use distance education methods to help mentally alert frail elderly and isolated older people	2.8	2.3
26. U3As will pay outside experts to run some specialist courses	3.4	3.8
27. U3As will pay for specialist teaching facilities	3.4	3.1
28. governments should be asked to provide funding to help U3As to develop	3.5	2.4
29. there will be growing technological demands on older people	2.4	1.8
30. there will be fewer jobs therefore younger members of U3A	2.1	2.0
31. members' interests will differ from today's	3.1	2.5
32. there will be more emphasis on retired people helping themselves	2.0	2.0
33. there will be greater communication and sharing resources between U3As	2.1	2.1
34. U3As will run more activities away from home base eg educational travel	2.5	2.1
35. members should pay considerably more for higher level of service	3.6	3.5
36. a centralised "clearing house" for borrowing resources would assist U3As	2.6	2.0