

**U3A Online: a virtual University of the Third Age for isolated older people**

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## U3A Online: a virtual University of the Third Age for isolated older people

### Abstract.

U3A Online is a virtual University of the Third Age (U3A) that provides intellectually challenging courses for isolated older people as well as for conventional U3A members. Volunteers run the programme and all courses are written and led by retired people, principally for third agers who are isolated by distance or circumstance from taking part in conventional face-to-face U3A activities. This paper reports on two studies that were designed to reveal some of the characteristics and aspirations of participants in the U3Aonline programme. During the proof-of-concept pilot study run in 1999 telephone interviews and pre and post course written questionnaires were used. A sample of 'experienced' course members provided written data by questionnaire for the 2001 survey. The studies show that many participants who are unable to take part in mainstream adult education activities attribute a new sense of purpose and excitement in their lives to the virtual communities they begin to develop through their online courses.

### **Lifelong learning and good health?**

Recent studies that imply a causal link between cognitive stimulation and aspects of health and well being suggest intriguing future possibilities for lifelong learning. Schaie (1993) reported that in cases where intellectual decline had been found, it might be possible through carefully planned instruction to reverse the process. Young et al. (1999) demonstrated in their study on rats that a complex, enriched environment stimulated new cell growth and prevented cell death in the hippocampus. They speculated that similar positive findings, which have come from experiments with mice, tree shrews and non-human primates, might apply to all mammals, including humans. Coffey and colleagues (1999) studied the brains of 320 volunteers aged 66 to 90 years old using non-invasive Magnetic Resonance Imaging. They reported that education exerts a protective effect, with educated people being afforded greater protection from age-related mental impairment and possibly dementia, than poorly educated people.

Many practitioners, theorists and policy makers within the lifelong learning domain will also be interested in findings from recent adult education studies that provide additional support for the sound mind-sound body aphorism. Dench and Regan (2000) carried out structured face-to-face interviews with 336 individuals in the UK who were aged 50 and over, to determine the extent of participation and their motivation for learning in later life. Among a number of positive health-related findings they found that those in poor health or with a disability reported that learning improved their enjoyment of life, their self-confidence, and their ability to cope. Similar positive findings were reported in another UK-based study to determine the impact of learning on health. In a study commissioned by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, Aldridge and Lavender (2000) analysed responses from 520 individuals and organisations involved with adult learning. They found that 87% of participants associated benefits to their physical health with their learning activities. Benefits included feeling less tired and managing pain more effectively. An even higher percentage (89%) reported positive emotional or mental health benefits from their periods of learning.

Positive health-related benefits have also been linked to learning activities developed for those approaching the end of the lifelong learning continuum. It appears that some individuals in the Fourth Age, who are partly or largely dependent on others, may benefit from suitable educational activities. Soulsby (2000) found almost universal acceptance among caregivers that engagement in learning and similar intellectually challenging activities enhances dependent people's quality of life, lessens dependency and improves their sense of well being.

The health-related findings from the social sciences domain are every bit as enlightening as those from the physical/biological sciences domains. Over the past few years self-reported health has gained credibility for providing a more effective measure of individual health than objective assessments recorded by observers such as clinicians. How individuals feel about themselves appears to be an important key to overall health. Studies in which participants directly or indirectly report beneficial health outcomes associated with their adult education activities, provide valuable evidence that something associated with the psycho-social processes of adult education has positive health and well-being attributes. It seems that provided individuals feel good about themselves then they can live comfortably with afflictions that might otherwise translate into depression and other manifestations of ill health.

### **The importance of social networks in later life**

The importance of social networks to well-being has been widely documented (Bowling 1994). For older people in particular the quality of their social networks is much more important than the number of people with whom they come in contact on a regular basis. Most adult education activities take place in socially stimulating environments. It is possible therefore that the social interaction that takes place between groups of like-minded people in the stimulating environment of adult education classes is associated with the positive health-related findings discussed above.

Generally, Third and Fourth Age people are faced by many more circumstances that can severely disrupt high quality social networks than are faced by younger people. For example, retirement and relocation abruptly severs social networks for many retirees. Older people also drop in and out of periods of ill health much more frequently than younger adults do. In addition, at some stage, many older adults are forced to give up driving and their social networks are jeopardised if public transport

is inadequate, too expensive or too difficult to access. Many older people also become caregivers for ailing spouses or friends. And, most obviously with advancing years, death of a spouse or close friend becomes an increasingly likely event.

The impact of these and similar unexpected calamitous events on older persons' social networks is readily apparent from demographic data that are routinely available in many developed countries. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (1999) reports that the average adult spends about three hours alone each day. In contrast, a man aged over 65 living by himself, is likely to spend 12 hours a day on his own, which represents 83% of his waking life. A woman of similar age, living by herself, will spend about 78% of her waking life alone.

Findings that link good health with engagement in cognitively challenging activities are intriguing, not just from the participant/practitioner viewpoint but also from a national policy perspective.

Governments of ageing societies everywhere are seeking alternatives to help reduce the rapidly growing cost of direct health care. Prevention is much cheaper, and a socially more laudable alternative, than reliance on medical heroics. The above studies, and numerous other studies that have been published in the last two decades, give increasing credence to the idea that lifelong learning may have preventative health implications. Moreover, most adult educational activities are inexpensive, uncomplicated and widely accessible. They require little in the way of expensive infrastructure and most can be readily situated within the community. It is not unreasonable to suggest that, in the not too distant future, the beneficial effects of lifelong learning could take their place alongside other national campaigns that routinely promote healthy living such as good diet, sensible exercise and not smoking.

### **Older people and new communications technologies**

In recent years a number of researchers have begun to investigate the suitability of the Internet for reaching out to isolated people. For example, some studies have highlighted the potential of the Internet to create meaningful social interaction (Komito 1998). Ito et al. (1999) carried out an ethnographic study of older people who are regular users of SeniorNet in the USA and reported positively on the medium's potential for social interaction and individual empowerment. By contrast, Kraut and colleagues (1998), in their longitudinal study of 169 adult Internet users, observed declines in everyday household communications, declines in the size of social circles, and increases in depression and loneliness. However, Hampton and Wellman (2001) question commentators who argue that as people spend more time online they become isolated in the home and reduce social contact. They carried out a longitudinal study of residents of Netville, a suburb in which residents had routine access to advanced new communication technology. They found greater evidence of community involvement and strengthened ties with friends and relatives living far away from Netville, compared with those who did not routinely use the new technology.

Regardless of arguments for and against the social influences of the Internet, many older people do not have a wide range of options to choose from when it comes to re-establishing or maintaining their social networks. Frequently, people who live alone are isolated by a daunting array of constraints that militate against their ability to take part in personally rewarding activities like adult education programmes, which can promote cognitive development within a socially stimulating milieu. Some isolated and lonely older people are not averse to experimenting with new technology in order to join in adult education programmes that have the potential to enrich, and even change their lives. For example Swindell and Mayhew (1996) showed that frail elderly people with active minds, who were confined to their homes by illness or incapacity, gained measurable benefits from educational programmes delivered by teleconference. Moreover, several of the participants developed new social networks as a result of interacting with like-minded others in their teleconferencing groups. They stated that the educational programme was the catalyst that induced them to experiment with a novel method of communicating and exploring beyond their physically and psychologically constrained horizons.

The Internet is a much more flexible tool than any other communication technology for meeting the educational needs of isolated older people. The Internet is becoming increasingly easy for novices to use, information can be exchanged quickly, often in real-time, and once the technology is in place it is quite inexpensive to use. Most importantly for educational purposes however, users can access the

information and communicate with others when and if they want to, rather than being captive to a course leader's timetable and agenda.

The following diverse and seemingly largely unrelated themes emerge from the preceding literature discussion. First, older adults report that cognitively challenging activity is beneficial to their health. Second, years of research into the area of social networks consistently shows that a close network of friends and confidants is fundamental to an individual's well being. Third, social networks are jeopardised by a variety of circumstances that confront almost everyone in their Third and/or Fourth Ages. Fourth, adult education activities provide cognitively challenging activities, usually within a social setting. As such, perhaps adult education activities contribute to the health and well being of participants (and thence the nation) in an inexpensive and, so far, largely unheralded way. Fifth, the Internet appears to be a suitable medium for delivering adult education activities to isolated older adults.

All this is well and good but are third agers really interested in learning to use technology that played little part in their earlier lives? In Australia, which ranked sixth in the world in 2000 in terms of total numbers of Internet users, the answer appears to be "yes". Although absolute numbers of older Australians who access the Internet are less than those of younger cohorts, the fastest rate of Internet growth is now occurring among older adults. For example the number of adults aged 55-64 years accessing the Internet doubled between 1998 and 1999, and by 2000 comprised 26% of that population (ABS 2000). The principal motivation for older Australians to switch on to the Internet is to keep in close communication by email with their children and grand children. Other major uses are to take control over their finances, monitor their health, and for leisure and shopping.

Little has been published about older person's learning through the Internet. Certainly, there are numerous examples of interesting and innovative programmes that are run in many countries, but almost all of these involve courses on how to teach older people to use the Internet. What are the educational implications once this important but comparatively routine skill has been acquired? What are the characteristics and aspirations of older learners who might wish to use the Internet as a tool for assisting them to become members of an electronic community of learners. The remainder of this paper focuses on two studies that seek to provide preliminary information about some of the characteristics and aspirations of older online learners.

### **U3A**

One of the most notable adult education success stories of the past two decades has been the rise and rise of the self-help University of the Third Age (U3A) model. This approach has been successful for many reasons, not the least of which is its very low cost. Cost is an important consideration for most retired people. In the self-help approach to U3A all the teaching and all the administration is carried out by volunteer members, often operating from free or very inexpensive community centres. Because the self-help approach does not depend either on paid or voluntary Second Age expertise it is almost impervious to the two major constraints that bedevil so many other excellent adult education programmes. These are, the vagaries of government or institutional funding, and/or the need to charge substantial membership fees to cover running expenses.

Apart from being a low-cost enterprise U3A has succeeded in attracting the interest of a growing Third Age clientele because it has demolished many of the barriers that previously deterred older adults from participating in later life learning (Courtenay 1989). There are no entry requirements, no exams or awards, and courses are run at convenient times from accessible community locations and in an atmosphere that encourages participants to share their ideas. The common-sense basis of adult education approaches that empower older people, regardless of their prior educational backgrounds, has translated into very wide acceptance around the world (Swindell and Thompson 1995).

### **U3A Online**

Although U3A programmes, and similar emancipatory adult education programmes for older adults, are widely available in developed countries the realities of life in general, and ageing in particular, are such that not everyone who would like to join in can do so. Distance and inadequate transportation are obvious constraints. However even in the midst of cities and surrounded by many opportunities for personal enrichment, large numbers of older people are isolated by one or more of a daunting array of circumstances that prevent them from leaving home. Illness, incapacity or being a long-term caregiver

for a friend or relative are common isolating circumstances.

The idea of using the Internet to deliver U3A services to isolated older people was first discussed on an email list in 1997 by a group of U3A leaders from Australia, New Zealand and the UK. Their idea was to develop an electronic U3A without walls in which U3A colleagues from any country could share resources with each other and provide intellectually challenging activities to older people, particularly those who are isolated. In 1998, as part of the International Year of Older Persons celebrations, the Australian Federal government provided funding that led to the development of U3A Online. The major objective of U3A Online is to provide cognitively challenging activities through the Internet and to develop resources that will assist conventional U3As to achieve their educational objectives.

A team of volunteers who communicate mainly by email runs U3A Online. Volunteers also write and teach all courses. So far 13 courses, each equivalent to about 8 weeks of part-time study, have been presented. Although the project is reliant on volunteer expertise each new course is expensive, costing about \$3500 to deliver online. Part of this cost involves payment for the specialised skills of transforming written text into learner-friendly, interactive, online text. The other major cost is for commercial site-hosting costs. As well there are comparatively minor costs such as reimbursement of volunteers' out-of-pocket expenses like telephone, printing and Internet costs.

Two studies into the characteristics and aspirations of U3A Online participants have been carried out during the three years of the programme's existence. The first of these in early 1999 focused mainly on two 'proof of concept' pilot courses, which were developed to test whether older people showed any interest in learning online. One of the courses, 'Writing Family History' was highly interactive. Participants were each helped to write several 400-word stories and these were 'published' on the course electronic forum for discussion by the course leader and others in the group. The second course, 'Botany for Knowledge and Enjoyment' was more conventional in that it somewhat resembled an online text. However it too provided opportunity for discussion, again by electronic forum. Detailed results of the first study were published in a lengthy report that included perceptions and critiques from all major contributors to the development and implementation stages of the pilot programme (Swindell and Vassella 1999). A more concise version has also been published (Swindell 2000). The most recent study was completed in September 2001. Preliminary findings from that study, and some comparisons with the 1999 study are discussed in the remainder of this paper.

### **Some characteristics and aspirations of U3A Online participants**

Data for the 1999 study were obtained by pre and post questionnaire from 29 participants who completed one of the two pilot courses. In addition to this written data, participants were interviewed by telephone half way through their 8-week course. Data for the 2001 study were obtained by written questionnaire from 34 participants who had completed one or more courses during the prior two years of the programme. Table 1 lists demographic data from both studies. All data are reported as percentages.

#### **Age**

The Third Age refers to a stage in life when individuals are no longer tied to the responsibilities of regular employment and/or raising a family. As a consequence of this very open definition, which is not linked to a chronological definition of age, membership of conventional U3As appeals to individuals from a broad range of people, albeit the majority of whom are aged 60 and older. Indeed many U3A groups have recognised that social change, such as voluntary or enforced early retirement, has led to large numbers of relatively young people becoming third agers and have chosen to omit any reference to a minimum age for membership. U3A Online has adopted a similar liberal interpretation and, in fact, has gone one stage further by acknowledging that its courses could help to improve the quality of life of disabled adults of any age, provided that they are not in regular employment. Despite this openness to a broad sector of the adult population U3A Online does not currently attract younger people. Only one person in the 2001 survey was younger than 50 years old.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of U3A Online participants in 1998 and 2001**

Demographic characteristic	1998 survey	2001 survey
	(%) n=29	(%) n=34
<b>Age</b>		
Under 55	17	6
55-64	31	47
65-74	45	26
75+	7	21
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	72	59
Male	28	41
<b>Location</b>		
Large centre (population over 20,000)	52	48
Medium centre (pop 2000-20,000)	21	24
Small centre (pop less than 2000)	21	9
Homestead within 50km of a town	7	12
Homestead more than 50km from a town	0	6
<b>Formal education</b>		
Minimal formal schooling	21	18
Completed high school or technical	31	29
University or equivalent	48	53
<b>Former occupation</b>		
White collar	76	68
Blue collar	14	23
Homemaker	7	7
Unskilled	3	3

About one fifth of the participants in the 2001 survey were in the older age grouping of 75 years and over, up sharply from the first survey. This may be an important finding for programme planners to emphasise and to build on because one of the main objectives of U3A Online is to provide intellectually challenging programmes particularly for isolated older persons. As discussed earlier, myriad factors can lead to social isolation and these tend to increase sharply in later life. For this reason many organisations that are involved with assisting particularly the frail elderly to maintain their independence, routinely include opportunities for them to mix socially. Thus, if U3A Online can attract those in the old-old age range and at the same time provide new opportunities for participants to develop new social networks among their like-minded colleagues, then the programme could have beneficial health as well as educational implications.

The following comments from the 2001 survey and from individual course evaluations suggest that the forums and other mechanisms used by U3A Online to promote interaction may indeed be helping some older people to develop new social networks.

‘I thoroughly enjoy being part of an on-line group sharing a similar interest. It is especially good when participants keep in contact after the course is finished’.

‘As an active participant I enjoy communicating with other members. One has become a good online friend’.

'I enjoy the feeling of learning and being a part of a group. It's like meeting old friends when familiar names crop up in other courses. I am really enjoying ongoing contact with one participant'.

'I missed people who did not respond for a couple of weeks, and when they returned with explanations about where they had been or what had happened to them, it was like greeting old friends again'.

'I thoroughly enjoy being part of a group. I find it hard to explain to others who do not understand a love of learning. Learning carries with it a need to discuss and share. U3A [Online] provides that'.

When seeking new funding opportunities to develop new courses U3A Online organisers may wish to emphasise the collateral implications of the healthy mind/healthy body duality. This idea is developed further in the discussion about the location of participants.

### **Gender**

A study of the leisure organisations that older adults belong to in the city of Brisbane showed that women outnumber men in four of the five categories of groups that were studied. The four categories were 'social' groups, 'intellectually challenging' groups, 'hobby' groups and 'helping others' groups. The only exception was found in some groups with a 'sporting/exercise' emphasis such as bowls and golf clubs (Swindell and Mayhew 1998). In general, women seem to be better joiners of leisure organisations than men are. The same holds true for Australian U3A groups in which an early study showed that females outnumbered males by a wide margin (Swindell 1993), in one case as high as 10:1. Similarly, women outnumber men by a considerable margin in U3A Online. In its first year of operation U3A Online attracted many more women (72%) than men (28%). This despite reports at the time that, in the general population, men considerably outnumbered women on the Internet (a statistic that no longer holds true for most countries). However, the gender disparity was not so pronounced three years later (women 59%, men 41%). It will be interesting to see whether this gender imbalance persists and, if so, to try and find an explanation for this. The answer does not lie in demographics because, in the wider ageing population, women do not begin to outnumber men to any marked extent until the age of 75 and older.

### **Location**

From the outset the U3A Online project was developed for isolated people. The definition of isolation was left up to the individual but it could include isolation by distance, illness, personal circumstance such as caring for a relative, or some other individual circumstance. However, because many older Australians live in small communities or in areas that are appreciable distances from a range of adult education and other leisure and support amenities, an initial assumption was that U3A Online would prove to be quite popular with geographically isolated older people. So far this has not been the case. In both surveys more than 70% of participants came from large population centres. These findings underscore an important aspect of ageing, namely that many older people, even those who live in large cities, apparently in the midst of an abundance of resources, experience a sense of isolation that often is not recognised by the majority of the community. The following comments suggest that programmes like U3A Online have the potential to make an important contribution to the well-being of older Australians, many of whom experience an increasing sense of isolation with age, despite their living in seemingly well serviced and well-resourced communities.

'I live in [suburb of a large city] with bad bus service. I do not have a car or use taxis. Have no family support. Have become more disabled and in constant pain over the past couple of years'.

'I live in [a large city]. Because I never know how I am going to feel from day to day [my health] stops me committing myself to a set routine like going to class'.

'Time spent studying and reading etc relieves the loneliness and boredom due [to poor] health and lack of transport problems....It helps relieve depression and lessens time wasted on introspection'.

'I feel as though I belong to something to keep my mind off my pain, also helps keep my brain working'.

'I enjoy these courses. They provide the stimulation of learning as well as allowing interaction with

other like-minded people. Interaction on this level is limited in isolated areas and situations. I have felt this communication has enriched the quality of my present life’.

‘On-line courses satisfy not only the needs of those who are mobility challenged but also those with random schedules that preclude them from attending a regularly scheduled class’.

There are several possible explanations for the low representation from geographically isolated area. The most likely of these is that the vast majority of the general population lives in urban areas and, all things being equal, most would be expected to come from urban areas. Of the relatively small percentage of older rural dwellers in the total population, only a very small fraction would have an interest in learning on line as well as the requisite technology and know how. Another contributing factor is likely to be the unreliable telephone services in rural regions and slow download speeds, coupled with the added expense of costs charged at long distance phone rates. A third contributing factor could be associated with the expense and difficulty of advertising the U3A Online message to rural communities.

### **Formal education backgrounds**

Formal education level is a predictor of whether a person is likely to take part in adult education activities. Generally, the higher the level of formal education the higher the likelihood of participation (Peterson 1983). Participants in both studies were asked to nominate their highest level of formal education completed. In both, the formal education backgrounds were similar. As anticipated, the majority of participants came from a more advantaged educational background than that of the average older Australian. Eighty per cent had completed high school or better. However, the remaining 20% had minimal formal education backgrounds, having completed only primary school or one or two years high school. The majority of people who are likely to be attracted by programmes like U3A Online since it began, and for the next few years, would have experienced their compulsory schooling during post Great Depression and World War 2 days. For many children of that era compulsory education concluded at primary school and few parents could afford to send their children to one of the few high schools that existed in those times. Programmes like U3A Online may prove attractive to isolated older people who were denied the opportunity in earlier life to continue with their education.

### **Former occupations**

About 70% of the participants formerly held professional, business or managerial occupations. The remainder came from backgrounds like homemaking, the trades and farming. These latter occupations are not normally well represented in voluntary adult education programmes. In future studies it will be interesting to see whether Internet programmes of this nature attract appreciable numbers of older people whose working lives did little to encourage participation in adult education programmes.

### **Other findings**

#### **Communications preferences**

All courses provide opportunities for participants to interact, most commonly by electronic forum. An electronic forum is similar to, but functionally more limited than email because participants must log on to their particular course and remain connected while they read or reply. This can be costly for country people who are charged by the minute for phone connections. However, an advantage of electronic forum over email, is that topics (called threads) are automatically organised by thread and listed in chronological order making it very easy to keep track of who has said what, and when. U3A Online is unlikely to introduce live interaction because ‘chat’ is not a useful medium for encouraging reflective discussion. Apart from this, live interaction would negate one of the greatest strengths of online learning, namely the flexibility to work to one’s own schedule.

Attempts at encouraging interaction by forum were not as successful as had been hoped for. All courses were developed with discussion questions in each of the eight weekly sessions. In addition some of the course leaders posed additional questions on the forum. In post course evaluations almost all course leaders expressed disappointment about the unresponsiveness of many of their participants. In turn, many of the participants expressed frustration about failing to hear from others in their group. Their comments made it clear that many wanted to interact with others. One participant observed that ‘...the lack of interaction was most disappointing, and even quite obvious challenges to the others by myself and [one other participant] went generally unanswered’. Another wrote that she ‘...really

missed the interaction with others that had been a feature of [another U3A Online course]’.

Apart from failing to interact by forum a number of participants also neglected to provide electronic profiles of themselves. Profiles are a feature of each course welcome page where course members are asked to provide brief background details so other course members, as well as the course leader, can understand something about their colleagues. It was not uncommon for a quarter of the course members to fail to complete this task despite individual follow up email requests to do so, from the course leader.

During the 1999 evaluation participants who had not interacted electronically with other course members were interviewed by phone. A variety of reasons for not interacting were given. One person had crippling arthritis of the hands. Illness was given as a reason by several, and others had been away for periods during their 8-week course and felt that they had lost the context of the discussion and could no longer contribute. A number of others said they were too embarrassed to express themselves in writing to their qualified leader and to the rest of the group. A small number were unfamiliar with computers and did not understand how to submit their profiles or send a forum message. Whatever the reasons it is quite clear that some people do not want to interact with others. Regardless, almost without exception, all said that they enjoyed knowing about the backgrounds of others and reading what they had to say.

The 2001 study asked the question ‘what is your preferred method of study for online courses?’ Responses are summarised in table 2.

**Table 2: Preferred study methods**

No interaction with course leader and colleagues	12%
Some email interaction with course leader and colleagues	68%
Considerable email interaction with course leader and colleagues	20%

Clearly some participants prefer not to exchange ideas with others in the group and their wishes should be respected. However, when there are more enrollees for a course than allotted places it would seem preferable for available places to be reserved for those active participants who want to interact. ‘Passive learners’ could be offered the course as an online independent study.

In an effort to overcome the perceived difficulties of communicating by forum, the course leader of a recently developed course, ‘Autobiography and Journalling’, experimented with interaction by email list instead of forum. An email list allows course members to discuss specific topics by email, with the list robot automatically sending an individual’s contribution to everyone else in the group. The course leader moderated the discussion. The email list proved to be very successful in this particular course. All participants regularly posted stories and anecdotes. Following the course, many positive comments were received about the high level of interaction as well as about the course content itself. As one participant observed ‘the level of e-mail activity which this course generated helped me feel much closer to the other students than I have in most other courses I’ve taken’.

Many older people initially are attracted to the Internet because it is an inexpensive, rapid and convenient medium for keeping in touch with family and friends. For this reason email lists may be a preferable way for promoting U3A Online interaction among older people. The comparatively familiar skill of communicating by email could well be one of the keys to greater interactivity. On the other hand, some courses lend themselves more readily than others to discussion, and some course leaders are better able to promote and sustain discussion than others are. These factors, rather than the email list itself, may have been of greater importance. Testing email lists within a number of courses that have Forum interaction may lead to a better understanding of the variables that are conducive to higher quality interaction.

As discussed earlier interactivity is an ideal that is certainly worth persevering with despite the variable response rates found to date. One participant noted a beneficial practice effect. ‘[I] enjoyed the views expressed by others. I feel that the more one uses the computers, the better one gets at

interaction via email and forums'. Another observed 'I didn't feel isolated due to the forum and felt 'part of the crowd' even though other participants could be thousands of kilometres away'.

### **Payment for courses**

When U3A Online offered its first courses in 1999 the idea of using older volunteers to write and teach courses via the Internet to isolated older people had not previously been tested. It was well known that a great many older people in the Australian population experienced some form of isolation but there was no data about how many older people had access to the Internet and how many would have any interest in learning online. For this reason enrolment in U3A Online was free for the first year. Because U3A Online was a novel concept a number of articles and interviews were initially run by the media and, quite quickly, information spread about the project, particularly in larger centres. By the end of the first year nearly 300 members belonged to the organisation.

Despite the major emphasis on volunteer input, course development and other costs are high. These costs initially were met by government grant. However, renewed funding for the second year of the project was tied to a stipulation that the company should begin to recover costs and to seek sponsorship from commercial agencies. An annual membership fee of \$30 was introduced and this almost immediately resulted in a very substantial fall off in membership to around 60. As more courses were added membership slowly grew. However, the rate of growth was slow so a new membership structure was introduced. Fees were dropped to \$12 annually for isolated older people, which entitled them to enrol in as many courses as they wanted to in a year. The courses were also offered for the same fee to financial members of 'conventional' U3As. Other third agers who did not fit into either category could enrol for \$16 per course.

In addition to the new fee structure the courses were offered in three different ways to permit greater timetabling flexibility, and to cater for different learning styles. The three ways were interactive with the course leader; interactive without the course leader; and independent study. In the 2001 study only, participants were asked to indicate what they felt would be a reasonable fee to charge for the courses. More than 70% indicated that they would be willing to pay more for the courses with the median figure being \$25 (range \$15-\$100). About one quarter responded that the current fee was appropriate. One person did not want to pay.

### **Isolation**

The combination of lower course fee, greater variety of courses, and variety of ways of studying has resulted in a steady increase in new enrolments, most notably from members of conventional U3As. However, the principal philosophical commitment remains to assist isolated older people. To determine the level of involvement by people who considered themselves to be isolated, participants were asked to indicate from a list of four choices the extent to which they felt isolated during daily life. About half of the participants (47%) indicated that they experienced some feelings of isolation in their everyday living. Of this 'isolated' group 12 (75%) believed that their involvement with their courses had helped to alleviate their sense of isolation or loneliness.

### **Reason for joining**

Participants were given a list containing 7 likely reasons for joining and asked to choose as many of these that applied to them, and to rank these in importance. They were also asked to list other reasons if appropriate and to rank these as well. Most participants (62%) were primarily attracted by the opportunity to learn new things. The next highest choice was to communicate with stimulating people (15%), closely followed by enjoyment in doing new things (12%).

### **Recent developments**

After three years of learning by trial and error the U3A Online developers feel sufficiently optimistic about the future of the project to have recently introduced major modifications that could ultimately result in the project operating more along the lines of a traditional self-help U3A. The paid coordinator has been replaced by a team of volunteers who communicate by email and share the range of tasks needed to keep the project running. To date this team approach has worked very effectively. In addition, new courses are being written under the guidance of another team of volunteers with editorial experience. Covering the cost of transformation of the written materials into the electronic product remains an obstacle that will not be overcome until the requisite skills are more commonplace among retirees. The current plan is to seek sponsorship for individual courses. Other volunteers have

begun to systematically document each of the essential tasks that had been routinely carried out by the paid coordinator. When completed the stepwise instructions for each task will be placed on the home page to inform and assist the increasing numbers of volunteers who are keen to help with the project. The original concept of a U3A without boundaries, enriching the lives of third agers regardless of where they live, has also been reinforced by cooperative activities with U3A colleagues in other parts of the world. The writer of one of the earliest courses 'Design in your Life' lives in the UK. She has run her course three times, on the last two occasions with a range of participants drawn from geographically and culturally diverse countries including the UK, Australia, NZ, USA and Germany. Evaluations of these trials were very positive. As a result of feedback from two participant observers from the large Elderhostel organisation for older people in the USA, Eldehostel has indicated that if it ever needed to develop online courses for its members it would do so in association with U3A Online. The U3A movement in the UK has also begun to experiment with on line courses. Towards the end of 2001 the UK U3A course entitled 'Art History' was offered to equal numbers of participants from the UK and Australia. Again, the results were positive. U3A Online courses will be offered through the UK U3A movement from the beginning of 2002. These highly successful joint activities hint at a future in which talented U3A course leaders from any country can reach out through the Internet to help like-minded colleagues regardless of where they live.

### **Conclusion**

This paper began by discussing the emerging links between cognitively challenging activity and aspects of good health. Studies were discussed in which qualitative and quantitative findings suggest that keeping the brain active in later life may lead to measurable improvements in health and well being. Whether or not there are measurable benefits between later life adult education programmes and good health may be difficult to prove. Regardless, few people would argue with the notion that those who keep themselves mentally active are likely to remain better equipped to cope with the exigencies of ageing than those who simply give up trying. The danger to health caused by social isolation was then discussed and specifically related to the wide range of circumstances that can thrust older people into socially isolating circumstances, which may lead to a drift into depression and a downward spiral of depression-related illnesses.

A burgeoning ageing population has ensured that retired people everywhere will remain faced with the reality that they must fund much more of their own retirement than was the case during the past few decades. In most countries social services safety nets have been severely curtailed by governments that have been forced to balance budgets and plan for a future in which a smaller proportion of the population supports the economy through payment of taxes. As a consequence many retired people will need to carefully husband their retirement benefits with an eye to maximising their health as well as prolonging their independence. Many will see the advantages of participation in adult education during their Third Age. Apart from being enjoyable and personally rewarding, adult education is cognitively challenging, it is a social activity in which like-minded people can form new social networks, and it is relatively inexpensive.

In the last few years the Internet has developed as a medium that can very inexpensively increase the range of opportunities for older people to continue to challenge their intellects. Moreover, the medium is capable of providing a level of interactivity that many find socially stimulating. During its three years of operation the U3A Online programme has demonstrated that adult education programmes delivered through the Internet can make a considerable difference to the lives of isolated people in particular and, probably, to others as well. Potentially, the Internet is a much more flexible tool than any other means, including face-to-face interaction, for meeting the educational needs of isolated older people. The Internet is becoming increasingly easy for novices to use, information can be exchanged quickly, often in real-time and, once the technology is in place, it is quite inexpensive to use. Most importantly for educational purposes however, users can access the information and communicate with others when and if they want to, rather than being captive to the personal timetables and agenda of other people.

Although small in absolute numbers older people are now far and away the fastest growing group on the Internet. As interactive technology becomes more commonly accepted in older peoples' everyday lives, programmes like U3A Online, which are inexpensive, unconstrained by geographical boundaries, and socially stimulating, appear destined to grow in importance.

Additional details about U3A Online courses and objectives can be found on the website <http://u3aonline.edna.edu.au/>

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