

**U3A Online: enriching the lives of older members of a multicultural society**

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## **U3A Online: enriching the lives of older members of a multicultural society**

### **Abstract:**

Maintaining high cognitive function and continuing to engage with life are two of the complementary factors that contribute to "Ageing Well". However isolating circumstances like incapacity, ill health, caregiving and poor transportation make it difficult for many older people to take part in activities that are believed to be fundamental to well-being. This paper draws on ABS data to argue that substantial numbers of older Australians from non-English speaking countries are particularly at risk of isolation because difficulties with English prevent them from engaging in interesting activities within their neighbourhood.

The Internet offers new flexibility for policy makers to support novel ways of "building bridges" between isolated older adults. U3A Online (U3AOL), the first virtual University of the Third Age (U3A), is an example of a new approach that provides cognitively challenging activities for older people regardless of geographical location. Since 1998 U3AOL volunteer administrators and course writer/leaders have developed a wide range of high quality, very low cost, adult education courses in which older people from many countries have participated.

This paper develops a case for how inexpensive programs like U3AOL can make a substantial difference to the lives of isolated older people. However, the actual conference presentation will focus more on the operations and successes of U3AOL and reveal some of the characteristics of those who have benefited from program.

## **Successful Ageing**

The global trend towards increased life expectancy suggests that preventative rather than remedial interventions must become the major goal for addressing myriad social and economic challenges that accompany population ageing. Friedrich (2003) summarised findings from a number of large studies that promote the notion of integration of physical, psychological and social domains for developing optimum solutions for ageing-related issues. A recent example of the substantial gains in understanding of ageing that can flow from an integrated research approach is typified by the MacArthur Foundation Study of Successful Ageing (Rowe & Kahn 1999). The study, which was actually a coherent set of dozens of individual research projects, was the most extensive and comprehensive multidisciplinary study on ageing in America. One aspect of the study entailed following the lives of more than 1000 high functioning older people for eight years to determine the factors that might predict successful physical and mental ageing. Many successful agers in the study reported that they sustain their mental ability as they age by actively working at keeping their minds sharp. The research suggests that "this is part of a cycle that promotes mental ability: the more you have, the more you do; the more you do, the more you preserve" (p. 130). Education was found to be the strongest predictor of sustained mental function in later life. Rowe and Kahn speculated on two possible effects that could explain this link. First, education in early life may have direct beneficial effect on brain circuitry; or second, education may set a lifelong pattern (eg reading, chess, bridge, and crossword puzzles) that serves to maintain cognitive function in old age. Furthermore, some actions to avert or minimise cognitive loss can be undertaken at any age. With training "elderly men and women who have experienced some cognitive decline can...offset approximately two decades of memory loss" (p. 137).

Successful Ageing, Ageing Well, Healthy Ageing and Positive Ageing are among a number of closely related approaches to ageing research that address the totality of the ageing process. It is now clear that choice plays a key role in an individual's ability to minimise, delay or even avoid many of the decrements that accompany biological ageing. For example, Rowe and Kahn (1999) defined successful ageing as an ability to maintain three key behaviours or characteristics. These are a low risk of disease and disease-related disability; high mental and physical function; and active engagement with life. Each of these is important and to some extent independent of the others. Clearly, maintaining high mental and physical function, and active engagement with life, both involve choice. However, even disease and disability are caused in large part by extrinsic factors, such as how we live and what we eat, and therefore are similarly influenced by choice. Choice is also involved in the regime we adopt in managing disease and disability once they occur. An important thrust of these integrated studies is that they have the potential to transform wider society's deeply ingrained, condescending mindset that ageing inevitably equates with poor health, decline and expensive reliance on social services, into a socially acceptable and more factual understanding of the realities of ageing.

### **Australians home alone**

One of the three main characteristics of people who age successfully is that they continue to actively engage with life through two main behaviours, which are often but not always closely related. These behaviours are - maintaining close social networks; and involvement with productive and interesting activities. The importance of social networks to an individual's well-being has been widely documented (Bowling 1994). However, in general, older people's social networks are in greater jeopardy than younger people social networks. For example, retirement or relocation abruptly severs social networks for many. Older people also drop in and out of isolating periods of ill health more frequently than younger adults. 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 the most obvious and increasingly likely isolating factor that accompanies advancing years is death of a spouse or close friend.

The impact of these and similar isolating 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) (2002a) reported that the average adult in 1997 spent about three hours alone each day. In contrast, 32% of older people aged 65 years and over lived alone in 1997 and they spent an average of 79% of their waking time alone (about 12.5 hours per day). It seems reasonable to speculate that many of these socially isolated older people would also have difficulty in taking part in productive and interesting activities. In other words their opportunity to actively engage with life, which is one of the three key criteria for successful ageing, may be severely curtailed. Unfortunately, the future implications for successful ageing are considerably worsened by projections of a sharp growth in numbers of people who will live alone. The ABS (2003) projects that by the year 2021 living alone numbers will grow by between 52% and 113% from the 1996 level of 1.6 million. The majority of these will be seniors aged 65 and older.

### **Australian immigrants home alone**

A sustained influx of immigrants to Australia has taken place in the last 50 years. Overseas-born residents currently comprise almost one quarter of the Australian population and many of these came from countries in which English was not the principal language. In 1993, 24% of recent immigrants who were born in other than main English speaking countries could not speak English well and 6% did not speak English at all (ABS 2002). Inevitably, the projected large jump in people aged 65 and older who will live alone by the year 2021 will include many immigrants. Immigrants who came from non-English-speaking backgrounds and who continue to have difficulties with English may be at greatest risk of social isolation in later life. The reason for this is that older people who have difficulties with English frequently revert to their "comfortable" native languages, which are firmly grounded in crystallised memory. As they become separated from younger English-speaking family members they will find it particularly difficult to find options within their home or neighbourhood that allow them to actively engage with life or to find activities that help them to maintain a high level of mental function. Their choices to adopt successful ageing strategies will be severely restricted.

It is not necessary to make any assumptions about Australia's future immigration policies when reflecting on the likely magnitude of isolation among ageing immigrants. Table 1, which was adapted from current ABS (2003a) data, shows that about one and a half million immigrants speak a language other than English at home. Although their mean age is likely to be lower than that of the Australian born population, large numbers will soon enter the 65 and older age group. For example, taking a relatively conservative estimate that only 5% of the total of 1.5 million immigrants who currently speak a language other than English at home are aged 65 and older yields 75,000 people. Applying the measure that 32% of the Australian population aged 65 and older lived alone in 1997 (ABS 2002a) reduces this estimate to a current at risk group of 24,000 older immigrants. This not insignificant number will increase several fold in a few years. Creative thinking on strategies to assist this population are needed now.

**Table 1: Main Australian population groups from Non-English-speaking backgrounds**

<b>Ancestry</b>	<b>Proportion of Australian population (number)</b>	<b>Language other than English at home (number)</b>
Italian	4.6% (890,000)	42.3% (375,000)
German	4.3% (830,000)	9.8% (80,000)
Chinese	3.2% (620,000)	79.6% (495,000)
Greek	2.2% (425,000)	68.8% (290,000)
Dutch	1.5% (290,000)	15.1% (4 000)
Lebanese	0.9% (175,000)	80.0% (1 500)
Indian	0.9% (175,000)	60.2% (110,000)
Vietnamese	0.9% (175,000)	95.9% (168,000)
Polish	0.9% (175,000)	40.1% (70,000)
<b>Total</b>	<b>19.5% (3,750,000)</b>	<b>(1,500,000)</b>

Adapted from ABS (2003a)

## **Widening successful ageing options through new communications technologies**

New communications technologies have the potential to encourage very large numbers of older people to easily engage in interesting and inexpensive successful ageing behaviours. There are obvious social and financial implications for multicultural societies like Australia, of providing older people in general and isolated older people in particular with more choices that assist them to maintain their independence. Maintaining independence is the principal goal of many older people and few issues strike greater fear than the prospect of depending on others for their most basic daily needs (Rowe & Kahn 1999). Some studies have highlighted the potential of the Internet to create meaningful social interaction (Komito 1998). Hampton and Wellman (2001) 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. These studies underscore the potential of new technologies to foster new social networks.

Even the more vulnerable isolated and lonely ageing people who may be on the verge of sliding into full dependency may be happy to experiment with new approaches that can enrich their lives. As a case in point Swindell and Mayhew (1996) showed that small groups of frail elderly people with active minds, who were confined to their homes by illness or incapacity, gained measurable benefits from educational programs that were delivered by teleconference. Several of the participants developed new social networks as a result of interacting with like-minded others in their teleconferencing groups. Although this particular study was run before Internet technology was widely available the potential for the Internet to help older people to maintain their independence seems to be clear. The Internet is a much more flexible medium than any other communication technology for empowering isolated older people. The Internet is becoming increasingly easy for novices to use, information can be exchanged quickly, often in real-time, once the technology is in place it is durable and quite inexpensive to use, and the proportion of older people who have used a computer continues to climb rapidly.

An obvious question to ask when discussing the potential of the Internet to assist older people to engage in successful ageing pursuits is - are they interested in learning to use technology that played little part in their earlier lives? In developed countries the answer is "yes". For example, a recent report showed that in 2002 18% of Americans aged 65 and over had Internet access (Lenhart 2003). Although this is a much smaller percentage than younger cohorts Fox (2001) noted that "wired" seniors in the USA are among the most devoted users of the Internet with approximately 69% going online each day compared with 56% of all Internet users. In addition the cohort behind make extensive use of the technology in their daily lives. Internet users aged 50-64 are likely to keep their Internet access even after they retire. Fox suggests that this "silver tsunami" may be the first generation who takes full advantage of all the Internet has to offer them as they get older.

The silver tsunami metaphor appears to apply to Australia as well as to the USA. In Australia, which ranked sixth in the world in 2000 in terms of total numbers of Internet users, growth among older users has been quite spectacular. Although absolute numbers of older Australians who access the Internet are considerably 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 frequently cited reasons are for taking control of finances, monitoring health-related sites, shopping, and engaging in leisure activities. The growing popularity of the Internet suggests that strategies directed at encouraging older adults to use the Internet to take further control of their lives, will not wither through technophobia or indifference to the Internet.

### **U3AOnline - a University of the Third Age (U3A) in cyberspace**

A number of papers have been published which describe the genesis of U3AOnline as well as some of the characteristics and aspirations of older people who have taken the personal "risk" of jumping into

the unknown to learn with U3AOnline. Previous publications can be downloaded from <http://www4.gu.edu.au/ext/u3a/>

Summary information about U3AOnline, the courses and participant reactions to the project can be found at <http://u3aonline.org.au/>

U3AOnline is the first U3A in cyberspace. It was developed specifically to provide intellectually challenging courses for isolated older people, as well as to provide additional learning resources for some 58,000 members who belong to the 210 "conventional" U3A groups throughout Australia and New Zealand. As is the case with all U3As there are no exams, prerequisites or awards associated with U3AOnline courses; participation is purely for the joy and challenge of learning something new. Eleven courses are currently available for older learners and another seven are in various stages of completion by the part-time writers. Each course represents about eight weeks study. Most participants report that they spend between 5-10 hours a week on their study but others spend much longer than that perusing the many links provided in the course materials.

Volunteers run the entire project. Because retired people have written and edited the courses costs can be kept very low. Currently, isolated older people in Australia and New Zealand, or members of conventional U3A groups, may enrol in three courses for \$16. If they want more courses in a year they pay a further \$16 for another three. They may elect to study the course materials as independent learners at any time throughout the year, or they may sign up to study in a group when the course leader is available and interact via email or electronic Forum.

### **New developments for U3AOnline**

A number of new developments suggest that U3AOnline will continue to grow in its ability to offer high quality, very low cost services for older people.

- Griffith University in Brisbane recently agreed to host U3AOnline free of charge and all courses and online administration processes now operate from a free Griffith University server. As a result, mounting pressures to increase course fees and/or seek sponsorship in order to maintain sufficient cash reserves to pay increasing commercial fees have disappeared. The majority of funds from the modest course fees can now be directed towards increasing the number and variety of courses.
- Adult education colleagues from the University of Ulm in southern Germany will translate several U3AOL courses and evaluate how older Germans react to learning via the Internet. They have selected "Religions of the World" as the first course to be translated because of the heightened international interest in different religions, which has been brought about by recent world events. A U3AOL volunteer editor is working with the translator to guide the layout of the course and provide technical advice as needed. If the German trial is successful it seems reasonable to speculate that similar successful trials run in other countries could ultimately lead to the internationalisation of U3AOL with new courses being written and taught by course leaders regardless of their location. Following the logic of the Successful Ageing and home alone arguments developed earlier in this paper the potential benefits for older Australians, particularly those who have difficulties with English, are clear. Griffith University will host the trials and assess the extent to which international courses place excess demand on its resources.
- U3A colleagues in the UK have recently become interested in online learning opportunities and have developed five courses that model the U3AOL courses. A joint agreement between the two groups has led to courses from both organisations being shared. Although the UK courses are somewhat more expensive than U3AOL courses the increased number and range of courses is advantageous for all participants.

These developments, together with information about some of the characteristics and aspirations of U3AOnline participants and how the project is perceived will be detailed during the conference presentation. A miniature of the PowerPoint slides that will be discussed is appended to this paper.

### **Conclusion**

From both individual and societal perspectives a basic human right is to live as long and as successfully as possible. Successful ageing policies, which encourage individuals to choose risk

lowering activities, appear to offer considerably more potential for assisting ageing populations to achieve this ideal than remedial interventions. This paper has drawn on recent ABS data to argue that substantial numbers of older migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds are currently "at risk" in Australia because they have become isolated from intellectually and socially stimulating activities. The paper further argues that novel programs like U3AOnline, which uses the Internet to engage older people in stimulating learning activities with interesting people, may suggest new policy directions that can assist isolated older migrants to engage in Successful Ageing strategies.

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