

Foreword

The processes and events leading to the funding of U3A Online are not important per se to this report. However, there are a number of misconceptions about how and why the project began, and why different personnel and organisations were involved. Dorothy Braxton, a member of the Project Management Group, has written this detailed background explanation to ensure that an accurate version of events is available for those who would like it.

Background to U3A Online

As Australia reaches the end of the 20th century there is a growing recognition of the demoralising effects of social isolation, particularly within the older sector of the community. Because it is largely invisible, it is an issue that until recently has been given scant attention. Being lonely is not something that many people are prepared to admit to; doing something about it seldom captures the imagination of mainstream society.

One organisation that has been well aware of the impact of this situation is U3A, the University of the Third Age, an international movement designed to provide low cost, lifelong learning opportunities for retired people in an informal atmosphere. Under one name or another, U3A now has several millions of members around the world - China's Seniors Universities alone boast one million. In Australia around 38 500 older people regularly participate. No prior qualifications are necessary and no degrees are awarded. Implicit in its philosophy is an understanding of the importance of the social interaction that it provides.

With everyone involved in the U3A movement already in the older age group and, with all of the members being volunteers, many U3As traditionally have a difficult time concentrating their efforts on maintaining activities for their own membership. Even so, in 1998, a number started looking at what they might do for IYOP, the UN International year of Older Persons. One such group was U3A ACT¹ in Canberra. Its Management Committee set up several projects, including giving support to a proposal from one of its members to initiate an Internet project designed to provide isolated people, who could not attend an ordinary U3A, with at least some of the advantages available to those in more fortunate circumstances.

'Isolated', in this instance, was seen as including people with disabilities, those who were confined for the most part to their homes as carers and those who were located in places too far from their nearest U3A. From the beginning it was seen as a national project with the potential to involve existing members internationally in an advisory capacity and as course leaders. And because U3As in both Australia and New Zealand have a close working relationship, groups across the Tasman were always regarded as partners.

The Canberra member directly responsible for the proposal, Dorothy Braxton, sought the cooperation of two other prominent people in the movement, Dr Jack McDonell

¹ U3A ACT - U3A of the Australian Capital Territory

and Dr Rick Swindell. Dr Jack McDonell of Melbourne is one of the 'founding fathers' of U3A in Australia and one of its most distinguished members. Dr Rick Swindell of Griffith University, Brisbane, has long been associated with the organisation and had already initiated an email discussion group for members called U3A Talk. Both were enthusiastic and could see the direction the venture, called Isolated Bytes (IB), could take, eventually, for instance, replacing U3A Talk with an Internet version. Those three formed a Project Management Group, PMG, and then established a wider Project Reference Group (PRG) with representatives from every State and Territory (Western Australia later withdrew). Three experienced members from New Zealand and the UK were also invited to participate. All provided valuable assistance and advice.

However, nothing was easy. All communication had to be by email and no funding arrangements were initially available. To ask U3As themselves to contribute money to a project, the value of which some might not necessarily appreciate or understand, was seen as counter-productive given that most struggle to keep up with the provision of their own resources. To overcome that situation, in the middle of 1998 an approach was made to Senator Kay Patterson (Vic), then the Federal Government's adviser on IYOP affairs. She gave a positive and enthusiastic response with the result that in July the PMG was approached by EdNA, the Education Network of Australia, to discuss a recommendation it was prepared to make which would give Isolated Bytes a grant of \$120 000.

EdNA, which is located within the Federal Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, is the prestigious Internet program supported by all State and Territory governments and by the Commonwealth of Australia. Its staff recognised the need to promote both an awareness and use of the Internet by older Australians and to encourage them to make further use of its almost unlimited educational resources. They saw the U3A project as a vehicle for doing that. For its part, the U3A team was more than happy to be associated with such a network. EdNA drew up a policy statement that considerably expanded the original IB concept but was one which ideally suited the longer term thinking of those members of U3A who saw the Internet as an essential adjunct to its programs. The PMG was invited to come up with a proposal which incorporated the policy 'deliverables' and the IB course elements. There was, however, a major constraint. Until the recommendation received the approval of the Minister for Education, (and there was no certainty of that), the discussions were to remain confidential to the three members of the PMG.

The new concept was undoubtedly exciting and opened up many new possibilities for the target audiences but it would also have to be said that the three members who comprised the PMG knew they had on their hands a totally new dimension to deal with. Physically, they were widely separated so could not get together to discuss matters. It would be true to say they went into it with little more than a great deal of optimism and a belief in what they were trying to achieve. They had to rely on telephone conversations and emails, and the goodwill of their own U3As and Griffith University, to meet some of those costs.

Project Funding

EdNA rightly asked how U3A could manage the finances of such a proposal. With no national incorporated U3A body, the IB program had been devised by a group of

enthusiastic individuals thinking along very modest lines, limited in its first stages only to providing online courses and social interaction via email discussions. To overcome issues which they could see would arise, the team, with EdNA's agreement, turned to ALA, Adult Learning Australia Inc., the peak body in Australia for Adult and Community Education which strongly supports Third Age learning, and sought its partnership. ALA's Executive Director, then Dr Alastair Crombie, willingly agreed to help and both he and ALA's Business Manager, Mary Hannan, came onto the PMG. (Following Dr Crombie's resignation from ALA in January 1999, his place was taken by his successor at ALA, Tony Brown.)

For the original three PMG members it was a hectic and worrying 10 weeks with the knowledge that a Federal election was about to be called any time. If that happened before Ministerial approval was received, the project could have been shelved.

Because of the confidentiality agreement, the PMG could not consult with its advisory team (the PRG), so its members had to design among themselves an agreement which was appropriate for the interests of both EdNA and IB. Eventually, in early September, just hours before the Government went into election mode, formal approval was received in a letter from the then Minister for Education, Senator Chris Ellison.

Soon afterwards it seemed obvious that a new name to better describe the enlarged concept was needed and with due regard to simplicity, those involved settled on the new title of U3A Online, with the course aspect retaining the original Isolated Bytes name for identification purposes.

All these points become important in any review of the project because, despite being circulated about it, it was clear that in the early stages some of the Australian U3A membership did not understand the project. Among the country's 128 U3As a minority criticised it for not consulting more widely, despite the wide representation it actually had. Some U3As were reluctant to become involved because they felt they 'did not have the resources to participate'. They failed to appreciate that the only thing they were being asked to do was to help promote the scheme where that was possible. What misunderstandings there have been have almost certainly occurred because many U3As still do not have offices of their own, let alone Internet-connected ones, and computer literacy remains, in many instances, a matter for their individual members. It also needs to be understood that the majority of members in 1998 were not computer users. Now, however, U3A computer courses are among the most eagerly sought after as a generation realises it is missing out on an important and useful technological advance.

Fortunately, today most U3As now see the advantages of U3A Online, and understand better what it is trying to achieve

The Project

With the grant assured, Sandra Duke was appointed as a paid coordinator to run the program on a day-to-day basis, working out of the ALA office in Canberra. Effectively she has been the linchpin, integrating all the different people and components of the project (nationally and internationally) and, in particular, handling all the applications for membership. She may not have been able to offer face-to-face

communication with the IB members, but she does do it screen-to-screen, providing a nice link for many who 'talk' about their isolation and loneliness and their interests with her.

Two U3A course leaders, George Chippendale from Canberra, and Keith Pearson from Melbourne, volunteered to spend the many hours needed to rewrite and teach their normal classes in what, for both, was a new electronic format. Theirs were to be the two pilot courses to be presented and evaluated during the project time frame. Others across Australia, NZ and the UK also began work on more courses to be offered after the trial period was over.

The project team had to embark on a steep learning curve. No one had any knowledge of how to organise virtual courses for older people who might well be quite unfamiliar with using the Internet. International universities and other organisations had been providing online courses for some years, mostly as commercial propositions, but a comprehensive search of the literature, and email exchanges with academics overseas, did not reveal anything which mirrored the U3A proposal.

To help with this aspect, the assistance of the Faculty of Education at the University of Canberra was sought. The Vice Chancellor, Professor Don Aitkin, willingly backed the venture. Further support came from the Canberra-based Internet enterprise, Chirp Web Design, which was appointed to host the website. Its Managing Director, Duncan Crombie, has taken a close personal interest in U3A Online, often stepping in to help members who have problems and offering advice to the PMG as to how best to approach various aspects of the program.

Within a few weeks of opening the IB course membership in late February 1999, isolated people from across the country were expressing their desire to participate. By the beginning of June (when this foreword was written), and with still a month of the DETYA contract to go, around 150 had enrolled. They come from small towns, from the cities and from rural areas. Two are from King Island in Bass Strait.

Remote U3As, which don't have access to the resources of the bigger groups in towns and cities, have asked to join as a group and already one retirement village has been enrolled with enquiries from others. Some U3As have asked if their members could participate in a particular course available online but which they themselves could not offer. The demand is increasing on a daily basis as isolated people say U3A Online participation is 'making a difference' to their lives.

Other groups in Europe and Canada are now known to be establishing similar Internet projects but U3A Online has been given to understand it is still retains the cutting edge.

Dorothy Braxton

3 June 1999

(The names of all persons directly connected with the project can be found in the Acknowledgements.)

U3A Online Project

(September 1998 - June 1999)

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Project Manager: Adult Learning Australia

Project Management Group:

Dorothy Braxton (U3A ACT)	Tony Brown (ALA)
Jack McDonell (U3A VIC)	Mary Hannan (ALA)
Rick Swindell (Griffith University, QLD)	Alastair Crombie (former Executive Director, ALA)

Project Co-ordinator: Sandra Duke

Project Reference Group (U3A members)

Dorothy Braxton (Canberra, ACT)	Barbara Foley (Brisbane, QLD)
Jack McDonell (U3A Network, VIC)	Marcia Nicholl (Adelaide, SA)
Rick Swindell (Griffith University, QLD)	Fred Thornett (Hobart, TAS)
Les Betts (Fern Tree Gully, VIC)	Norman Knight (Sydney, NSW)
Howell Jones (Cairns, QLD)	Gwen Banks (U3A Council NSW)
Bob Bettison (Franklin, NZ)	Allan Thompson (Darwin, NT)
Aldren Simmons (Christchurch, NZ)	Jean Thompson (Reading, UK)
	Tom Holloway (Warwick, UK)

Course Writers:	George Chippendale	<i>Botany for Knowledge and Enjoyment</i>
	Keith Pearson	<i>Writing Family History</i>
	Ian Wilson	<i>Continents on the Move</i>
	Mel Davies	<i>The Life and Times of Henry Lawson</i>
	Jean Thompson	<i>Design for Living</i>
	George & Lisl Singer	<i>Jogging the Brain</i>
	Margaret Allen	<i>Comparative Religions</i>
	Robert Comrie	<i>Genealogy</i>
	Byron Soulsby	<i>Introduction to Astronomy</i>

Project Evaluation: Rick Swindell and Ken Vassella (Griffith University)
Peter Grimbeek (Griffith University) - report consultant

Electronic Course Preparation:

Prof. Don Aitkin, Vice Chancellor, University of Canberra,
Associate Prof. Barbara Chambers and Dr Noel Vanzetti and
their team at the University of Canberra

Editorial Assistance: Bess Flores - Adelaide

Technology: Duncan Crombie and his team at CHIRP Web Design

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