

SENIORS EDUCATION IN BRITAIN AND AROUND THE WORLD

There are a number of features which appear to be common to seniors' education wherever it manifests itself. Although these are now common-place in discussions concerning this subject, it is nonetheless worth reminding ourselves of them.

Firstly, we live in a shrinking world. The combined impact of enhanced communications, the media, technology and travel, has been such that our minds have been opened to peoples, places and ideas which were either unimagined or only sketchily known in previous generations .

Alongside this, improvements in medicine, health care, hygiene, housing and diet, have all combined to lead to increasing longevity for the majority of people across the world. The extent to which this is occurring is shown by the fact that almost universally the growth in the numbers of older people has overtaken that of younger generations.

This, in turn, has led to a change, albeit a slow and gradual one, in attitudes towards ageing. And this more positive attitude is being shared by both society at large and older people themselves. At the very least it is a recognition that something has to be done in the face of demographic change.

Within what was all too often "the private world" of academia, in the Universities and in Higher Education, there is a growing recognition of the significant role which they can play within the wider civil society.

Finally, and not the least within these common features, is the increasing, and sometimes sudden realisation by politicians that they need to make a positive response to demographic change. This response and its practical outcomes are occurring at different rates in different places.

All of this has contributed to the development of **specific provision** for older people in the field of adult education.

That can most easily be discerned within **the University of the Third Age**, a term which, although not universally applied, gives us a working title by which we can identify those specific provisions which can appear under alternative titles such as "*Later Life Learning*" or "*Lifelong Learning*" and which resolve the problem for speakers of British English who rarely use the title "*Seniors Education*" . More important than the identification of an appropriate form of words is the notion that it is vital to design or facilitate learning opportunities for older people who fully take account of their unique position and needs.

This provision must be essentially client centred, focussed on what the learner seeks not what some external body wishes to provide, however well intentioned. This call for great flexibility and leads to a higher level than usual of participation by the learner. Such are the characteristics of programmes for older learners whether they are provided institutionally on behalf of older people OR by the voluntary activity of older people themselves. For these are the contrasting extremes of the range of opportunities for learning among older people which can be observed in many countries around the world.

By way of example, let us look at the following, all of which contain to greater or lesser extent institutional or self-generated elements of provision:

FRANCE University of Rheims, Institut Universitaire du Temps Libre:
a university run institute whose Director doubles as a Professor of Mediaeval History
Université Ouverte, Auch-Gascogne: organised by individuals in a very rural area
using visiting lecturers from neighbouring universities

BELGIUM Université des Aînés, Louvain-la-Neuve: based on the Catholic University in that town and serving more 5000 members in that part of French-speaking Belgium

FINLAND U3A as part of the Open University and a long-standing Adult Education tradition

SPAIN Indigenous and expatriate U3As: university based U3As together with British style self-organised U3As for English-speaking residents

INDIA The Indian Society of U3As & the Asia-Pacific Alliance: two recent developments with a focus on spiritual, cultural and environmental aspects of Indian life and cooperation with U3As in Nepal, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia

POLAND Promoting Cultural Heritage: U3A has been operating in this country for almost as long as any other. It also helps expatriate Poles in neighbouring countries to maintain their language and culture

GERMANY Gasthörstudium /Seniorenstudium: either the opportunity to "sit in" on university lectures or for the university to provide dedicated courses

SOUTH AFRICA 25 Learning Cooperatives: self-organised and individual

RUSSIA Open People's University / "Wisdom Ripening": some State led provision but one U3A in the Republic of Bashkortostan with a distinctive name is the result of an individual initiative which has led to the development of a number of others supported by the State.

USA "Learning in Retirement" > Lifelong Learning Institutes: as early as the 1960s retired professionals (mainly teachers) had set up courses for themselves, leading on to the Elderhostel movement for learning through travel and then to the Elderhostel and Other Institutes for Lifelong Learning

CHINA National Committee on Ageing & China Association of Universities of the Aged: springing from a Government Initiative of the Pensions Affairs Bureau the China Association of Universities for the Aged was set up. There are several million older people involved in these state supported institutions.

NETHERLANDS HOVOs - Higher education for Elderly People: these are professionally run, locally based institutes providing higher education for older people.

ICELAND The newest country with a U3A - this is the latest country where a U3A has been set up with an initial membership of 29

As we come to the British form of the University of the Third Age, recognised by its logo "U3A", we also meet *The Third Age Trust* which is the name of the national umbrella organisation of the British U3A movement.

The term "university" when used in connection with the "third age" can give rise to misunderstanding and misapprehension, so it is important to be clear about its meaning in this particular context.

In one definition, a university is an institution of higher education and research which grants academic degrees at all levels (bachelor, master and doctorate) in a variety of subjects. Such a university provides both undergraduate and postgraduate education.

A second definition uses the term "university" as derived from the Latin "*universitas magistrorum et scholarum*", roughly meaning a community of teachers and scholars.

The British U3A corresponds to the second rather than the first definition.

The immediate history of the U3A in Britain begins in the 1980s and it is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. However, the story of adult education in the UK can be traced back through the foundation of the Royal Society and the Dissenting Academies in the 1600s and on to the 1900s with the Mechanics Institutes and the Literary and Philosophical Societies.

The notion that there should be provision specifically for older learners has been, however, very much a 20th century development and in Britain it was inspired by a trio of exceptional individuals who were aware of the French initiative in this field and who adapted it to their own particular Anglo-Saxon circumstances and culture.

Peter Laslett, a Cambridge historian with a career spanning the decoding of Japanese intelligence in the 39-45 war; research and lecturing in Cambridge, including the founding of a group concerned with the history of population and social structures, and the development, with **Michael Young**, of the Open University. Young was a sociologist, social activist and politician. The author of the Labour Party's Manifesto which led to the election of the 1945 Labour Government, Michael Young founded or helped to found the Consumers Association, the National Consumer Council, the Open University and the University of the Third Age and was the author of the ground-breaking book "*The Rise of the Meritocracy*".

The third founding father of the British U3A was **Eric Midwinter**, happily still with us and the author of an authoritative history of the British U3A "*500 Beacons*", commissioned by the Third Age Trust to mark the achievement of the 500th U3A in Britain in 2004. Eric Midwinter is well known as a writer, broadcaster and consumer champion. He was Chairman of the Community Education Centre, Director of the Centre for Policy on Ageing and visiting Professor of Education at the University of Exeter.

These three pioneers, very aware of the history of British education, its particular ethos and form, including both its riches and its negative impact on many within the population, took their inspiration from the existing French model to work up their own British version which was presented to a first meeting in Cambridge in 1982 and spoken of in a BBC broadcast which produced some 400 responses. From this beginning, with initial financial support from the charitable sector, the three

founders formed themselves into a National Committee following a first Easter School, attended by some 75 people who helped to spawn early U3A activity in Cambridge, Oxford and London.

From the very beginning it was decided that the University of the Third Age should be based on certain key objects and guiding principles. Those which most clearly distinguish the British form of U3A from that of its partners in many other countries include a determination to open learning opportunities to all who are at the third stage of life, irrespective of previous qualifications, and to ensure that learning is for its own sake, without the award of diplomas or certificates.

The other distinguishing feature of the British system is the absence of distinction between teachers and learners. Peter Laslett's dictum *"Those who teach shall also learn; those who learn shall also teach"* guides the activities and structure of all British U3As which are essentially voluntary activities undertaken by and for their members. Thus self-help and mutual aid are fundamental to this form of U3A.

From that tentative beginning in 1982, the U3A movement has spread across the British Isles to the extent that currently there are more than 850 individual U3As with a total of over 290,000 members. Very often a new U3A will spring up as the result of the initiative of individuals within a community who organise a first meeting and then elect their own committee, very much following the pattern of the original founders of the movement. A recent survey reveals that the majority of U3As have between 200 and 500 members although at the extremes it is possible to find some with 50 or fewer members but others 500 to over a 1000 in size. What is common to virtually all these U3As is the pattern of a regular open meeting very often on a monthly basis together with a range of interest group meetings monthly, fortnightly or weekly. While the monthly meeting involving an invited speaker brings together a nucleus of perhaps a half to a third of the membership, the interest groups represent the central core of activity in the organisation. The range of interests pursued involves intellectual, cultural and physical activities so that a list of all those available across the country would run into hundreds. The principal UK national welfare organisation for the elderly, **AGEUK**, describes this as follows:

"The range of subjects embraced by the U3A is mind-boggling. Here are some groups we've randomly picked out of individual U3A websites:

Stained glass, wine-tasting, piano duets, botany, ambling, country dancing, Latin, Scrabble, bird-watching, lace-making, knitting, genealogy, belly-dancing, crosswords, astronomy, board games, computer skills, horse-riding, military history, kitchen gardening, digital photography, textiles and musical appreciation."

The British U3A is an organisation of Third Agers which is self-funded, locally based and operationally independent. A common annual fee to members of each U3A is about £20 per annum, to which is added a charge of £1 or two to cover costs of hiring rooms or providing refreshments, particularly where interest groups meet in private houses. At the heart of this organisation is self-help activity within an interest group. The number of such groups is, of course, as varied as the size and composition of each U3A. The majority of U3As offer between 21 and 50 such group activities but others offer 5 to 20 while some have as many as 100 going on each month.

A retired UK sociologist, Dr. T.S.Chivers, from his own experience within a U3A, has described the distinctive quality of UK U3A learning in the following terms:

"a very informal means of acquisition; de-emphasised distance between teacher and participant; easy movement from one role to the other (participant to convenor and vice versa); an experiential form of learning in many groups, which can lead to reflection and transformation; a sociable environment and a programme of wholly unasessed study."

At the same time, as Dr Chivers points out, the U3A offers forms of learning common in formal educational institutions: skills and continued learning in a range of subjects and within an interactive situation.

Although each U3A is operationally independent, they all work within the national framework of guiding principles and practices as set out and promoted by the Third Age Trust, the national umbrella organisation. This body consists of representatives of U3As in each of the 12 UK government regions, assisted by 7 full-time and 7 part-time paid staff based in the national office in London. The Trust and its activities are determined by the Annual General Meeting at which each U3A is entitled to be represented, provided it has made the required financial contribution which is currently £3.50 per member per annum. This level of funding enables the Regional Trustees to meet regularly every 6 weeks together with the elected Officers: Chairman, Vice-Chairmen and Treasurer. Also present will be the head of the professional staff, the National Administrator, and a small team of educational development officers whose role is to support the development of new U3As.

The Trust offers a range of services to U3As and to individual U3A members. Leaflets are compiled and made available which cover topics relating to U3A start-up, advice on group leadership, computer techniques, model constitutions, etc. The Trust has used funds donated by charitable foundations and sourced through national lotteries to equip and staff a resource centre which provides a loan service of non-book materials the only cost of which is the return postage.

Insurance cover for all U3As against claims for personal injury and the like is also provided by the Trust, together with legal and financial advice directed at U3A committees.

The Trust runs its own website www.u3a.org.uk which has both public and members' pages and provides an immediate link between the activities of the Trust and the wider membership. It is also a very effective means of publicising the U3A movement.

Faithful to the spirit of U3A volunteering, the Trust has recruited individual members who offer a subject based advisory service to leaders of interest groups.

5 times a year, the Trust publishes its magazine "*Third Age Matters*" which is produced by a professional editor working under the direction of an editorial committee of trustees. This magazine provides information and reports for members but, at the same time, it provides the public face of the U3A movement to the wider world. The magazine is distributed free of charge to members as part of the service financed by their subscriptions. In addition, there is another magazine published three times a year called "*Sources*" which is a thematic educational journal of particular interest to specific subject interest groups.

Each year the Trust organises a national conference, often held in a university conference centre and in collaboration with members of that university's academic staff. Speakers of national repute combine with leading figures in the U3A movement to make presentations on a wide range of themes and raise issues of interest and concern to U3A members. These gatherings also provide the occasion for elections to and reporting back from the Trust. In addition to the National Conference, two national Summer Schools are provided with short courses on academic and creative themes, very often run by U3A members with particular expertise. These Summer Schools are frequently over-subscribed and increasingly they are backed up by regional gatherings of a similar nature, again based on members' initiatives, contacts and expertise.

The local and regional groupings which involve collaboration between U3As enable a sharing of expertise and ideas; this networking has increased significantly in recent years.

One particular annual event organised nationally is the occasion when the Royal Institution, effectively the UK's academy of science, opens its doors to the U3A and provides a series of lectures held in its famous Faraday lecture theatre and provided by leading academics and researchers.

The Third Age Trust has established formal links with both the Workers Education Association, a long-standing adult education provider, and also with the Open University. The Trust is involved in consultations with the government on relevant matters

Other activities promoted by the Trust include Shared Learning Projects and On-line courses. SLPs involve the participation of a number of individual U3A members from different U3As working together with the paid staff of a local museum, art gallery, library or other cultural institution. They research artefacts or documents to which the professional staffs have not been able to devote time. At the conclusion of the research period the U3A group make a presentation to the professionals and thus provide additional resources to the institution.

To offer more depth of learning in particular topic areas, the Trust has combined with Australian colleagues to provide courses in specific topic areas which can be accessed on-line. They are described by the Trust as follows:

"U3A Online courses are short courses specially designed for older people and available through a partnership between Third Age Trust (the UK national U3A organisation) and the [U3A Online Inc.](#) (based in Australia).

These are courses for which no entry qualifications are required. They offer no credit on completion and are designed purely for personal interest and enjoyment. They have been written by volunteers who are experienced tutors or course leaders in their fields.

These courses are aimed at U3A members, ex-U3A members who are no longer able to attend a U3A, and those unable to access conventional courses for one reason or another (e.g. restricted mobility, disability, etc)"

This course can be tutored or untutored; in the former case there is no charge and the materials can be accessed and used at any time. Where the course is tutored there is a £5 charge and feedback is provided by the tutor via email. There is also a fixed timetable for completing the course units. The range of topics includes art history, creative writing and cultural and historical topics relating to Australasia and the Far East.

To complete the review of Third Age Trust activity mention should be made of participation by individuals in European development for older learners and the search for ways to support 4th Agers, who are unable to come to meetings. (Development of a “*virtual classroom*” is being considered as one possible response.)

Finally, reference should be made to the recent production of a series of DVDs which introduce the U3A to those unfamiliar with it and also to the publication of a handbook for Group Leaders which is itself the result of collaboration between volunteer practitioners within U3As. “*Time to Learn*” is subtitled “*Facilitating non-formal adult learning*” and this brings us back to the central feature of the British U3A, its insistence on the sharing of knowledge and experience. In the British U3A the learner is in control of their own learning and the motivation for learning is the enjoyment and benefit the individual derives from it. As the handbook points out, U3A groups frequently involve the active participation of the members who may well lead on topics which they have prepared or organised in partnership with other group members.

Looking to the future there are a number of issues to be considered. Non-formal, experiential learning raises questions around quality and evaluation. Without assessment and certification, how can the quality of learning be assured? If the learner can choose the level of participation they wish to make, how can their progress be evaluated? Such questions seem obvious within an educational setting until one is reminded that the purpose of the activity in Third Age learning is that which the learners determine for themselves. Nevertheless, there does remain that uncomfortable feeling that the U3A movement ought to be able to justify itself in more conventional terms of achievement. Perhaps the way forward is to recognise the achievements of those who come to U3A with little educational background but who nonetheless succeed in their positive contributions to the work of the interest groups - and there are many such examples.

With changes in retirement patterns and likely reductions in pension rates, will the funding of U3As become more difficult? With the growth of numbers there is already a serious problem in finding suitable premises for the monthly open meetings where several hundred may wish to attend. The use of closed-circuit television is one possible solution already in use.

More problematic still is the issue of how to extend the participation in U3A activity to that majority of older people in the UK for whom learning was an uncomfortable and unprofitable experience of their younger years and one not to be repeated? Or will the the' babyboomer' generation have overcome these inhibitions?

Finally, a constant concern in the British U3A movement will be to maintain an acceptable balance between its contribution to social cohesion and to intellectual enrichment.

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August 2012

