

**The U3A Network–Victoria Inc.**

**LATER LIFE LEARNING IN AUSTRALIA –  
THE ‘WHY’ AND ‘HOW’ OF U3As**

**Paper for the 1998 congress of the AIUTA, prepared by**

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**1 THE NATURE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE (U3A) MOVEMENT  
IN AUSTRALIA**

**Origins**

The Universities of the Third Age movement in Australia began in August 1984 with a small public meeting in Melbourne, Victoria. This was organised by four individuals who shared professional interests in adult education and in services for older people and who had become familiar, through the published literature, with the development of Universities of the Third Age in France and later in England. Some of us had already, during visits to Europe, made direct contact with people involved in this movement.

**Rationale for adopting the voluntary, self-help model pioneered in the UK**

It was clear to us that the traditional university system in Australia, which in 1984 was already feeling the effects of reductions in government funding, was unlikely to provide any resources, either in funding or in staff time, to support a new stream of older learners wishing to operate outside the existing course structures. Hence the original French UTA model, of operation in association with universities, was felt to be impracticable in our situation. The alternative voluntary, self-help model of U3As, pioneered in England, was the model which seemed more likely to take root in our society. In addition, those of us who were then promoting the establishment of learning structures for older people were philosophically more attracted to the concept of community-based groups organising programs based on the interests of their own members, than we were to the idea of structures being set up *for* older people by universities which had, up to that point, not taken any interest in them as a group and showed no real signs of doing so. At that first public meeting the voluntary self-help U3A concept was enthusiastically endorsed and was adopted for the first University of the Third Age groups set up in Melbourne. By the end of 1985, five of them were in operation—one in the central business district and four in the suburbs.

**Size and spread of the movement**

In Victoria—a State with a population of about 5 million—the U3A movement rapidly spread. No-one had a responsibility for going out into the community and promoting the establishment of new groups; rather, the idea spread by word of mouth. People who were already involved in the organisation of their own U3As could always be found to respond to requests to visit

Melbourne suburbs and towns throughout the State and discuss the idea with small local groups of individuals who had heard of the concept and were keen to try to set up a U3A of their own. The growth in the numbers of Victorian U3A is illustrated by this Table:

YEAR	1985	1988	1991	1994	1997
NUMBER OF U3As IN OPERATION AT THE END OF THAT YEAR	5	15	28	43	55

The total membership of these Victorian U3A at the end of 1997 was estimated to be about 10,700. Good statistics exist for the last seven years and during that period the average annual increase in total State membership has been just over 17%. This figure includes both the memberships of existing U3As, which have been increasing at an average rate of about 10% per annum, and increases due to the addition of new U3As.

The U3A concept spread rapidly to the rest of the country and before long there were U3As in every State and Territory. Reliable membership figures for the whole of Australia are available for the last three years, due to the work of Dr Rick Swindell, in Brisbane, who has annually collected and published all the data he can find for Australian and New Zealand U3As. The trends for Australian U3As are shown in the following Table:<sup>1</sup>

YEAR	1995	1996	1997
NUMBER OF U3As	108	114	119
TOTAL MEMBERSHIP	26346	31081	32757
INCREASE IN MEMBERSHIP FROM PREVIOUS YEAR		18.0%	5.4%

### **Cooperation between U3As and the emergence of regional associations**

In the very early days, in Victoria, informal regular meetings were held between representatives of the few U3As then in existence. We felt the need to keep in touch and exchange experiences. Also, there was agreement from the outset that members of one U3A would be welcomed as participants in activities of another, if there was space, without the need to pay a second membership subscription. The pattern established in those early days, of requiring members of a U3A to pay an annual membership subscription which then entitled them to attend as many activities in the program of their U3A as they wished, has largely persisted. These days, the annual subscriptions are usually in the range AUD 20 to 30. This low cost for involvement in U3As is a direct consequence of the teaching and administrative work being done voluntarily by the members and is, of course, a major attraction to prospective members.

The other feature of those early meetings was a decision that whenever news of a potential new U3A was received, invitations went out to it to send representatives to these meetings. So successful was this sharing of information and ideas that, before long, moves were made to establish a central State organisation to carry on the process. In the middle of 1988, the eleven U3As which were then established agreed to set up a formal association called the U3A Network—Victoria and to incorporate it under the State law for incorporated associations. The stated objectives of this new association are simple—to *provide communication between and services for Universities of*

*the Third Age in Victoria*, while recognising that its member U3As join voluntarily and remain independent and autonomous bodies. The Network does not, in any way, control their activities.

An important feature of this Network's structure is a requirement to hold, each year, at least four meetings of its Council. This governing body is made up of two representatives of every member U3A. 54 of the 56 U3As in the State are members of the Network. Council meetings are seen by member U3As as valuable occasions. On average, over 35 of the 54 member U3As make the effort to have at least one representative present, despite travel, for some, of hundreds of kilometres. The meetings try to dispense with formal business as quickly as possible and concentrate on matters of policy and, particularly, reports from those U3As which have done something innovative or which have obtained new accommodation or made new associations with other groups. This direct communication between representatives, at Council meetings, remains highly valued.

The Victorian Network is the best developed regional association of U3As in the country. There is a substantial Council of U3As in the State of New South Wales and this operates in ways which are similar to those of the Victorian Network. However it has many fewer members and all of those U3As are in cities and towns outside the State capital, Sydney. Sydney U3A, with nearly 5,000 individual members, is organised in a number of semi-autonomous regional grouping around the city. It is by far the largest U3A organisation in Australia and provides excellent programs for its members but has, so far, chosen not to join the NSW Council of U3As. Within other States there is informal communication between U3As but, so far, no definite moves towards establishing State organisations like those in Victoria and New South Wales.

### **Absence of a national association of U3As**

As might be expected from that description of affairs at State level, no national U3A organisation has been established. There are several reasons for this and one of the main ones is the problem posed by Australia's geography. It is a large continent. Sydney and Darwin are about as far apart as Athens and London. Brisbane and Perth are further apart than Bucharest and Seville. We retired folk have neither the funds nor the inclination to attend regular distant meetings. The telephone conference is a possible alternative but it is not an entirely satisfactory process and it is not cheap. Videoconferencing is available, but at even greater cost.

In addition to the geographical and financial difficulties of establishing a national association of U3As, there is the difficulty of seeing what such an organisation might usefully do. Political lobbying on behalf of U3As is one of the first possibilities which comes to mind. But the Australian constitution is such that most decisions which could directly affect U3As, those in the areas of education and social welfare policies, are the responsibilities of the various State governments or of Local authorities. There is relatively little which our national government could do to benefit U3As directly and therefore a national U3A body would have relatively little lobbying to do at that level.

One can imagine a useful role for some kind of national resource centre for U3As—an office which could accumulate data relevant to U3As and provide such things as

- news of developments and innovations in U3As themselves;
- information about educational resources which they could draw upon;
- news of forthcoming conferences and seminars which could interest members;

- information kits for special purposes (such as how to start a new U3A, or how to create computer-based administrative systems);
- links to other U3As and to similar organisations, both in Australia and overseas;
- promotional materials which U3As could use locally;
- advice about developments in the fields of education and health which could influence the operations of U3As, including summaries of government reports;

and so on. However, reflection on that concept will soon show that, given adequate funding, it could be established much more effectively in ways other than through the creation of the whole structure of a national association.

### **Networking, nationally**

Despite the absence of a national association, there have been some “national” U3A conferences in recent years. Each of these has been promoted by a single U3A or a small group of U3As which has taken the initiative of organising a major conference at its own “home base”, usually with some major theme, and extending invitations to attend (and to contribute) to U3A members from around the country. Attendance at such conferences tends to be dominated by members of the host U3A but nevertheless they have always attracted significant numbers of participants from all States and Territories—and also from New Zealand. Although such conferences have no mandate to generate policies on behalf of the whole U3A movement, they have been extremely useful forums for discussion of issues which affect us all.

In recent years, a new form of networking has emerged. A discussion forum has been set up using electronic mail. This is an arrangement known as a listserv, in which a number of “subscribers” all receive, simultaneously, a message posted by any one of them. It requires someone to take the initiative of setting up the system and acting as the “gatekeeper” for adding new subscribers to the list. This has been done by Rick Swindell and the system, called U3ATalk has, at last count, 66 subscribers. 51 of these are distributed over all States and Territories of Australia and in addition there are twelve subscribers in New Zealand and three in the UK. U3ATalk is an unstructured forum in which there are exchanges of a wide range of information and ideas. In recent times, for example, these have included

- advice on starting and maintaining discussion groups,
- listings of international U3A addresses and internet web sites,
- ideas for helping isolated people to become involved with U3As,
- information on where to find resources for studies in mediaeval history and
- discussion of the extent to which U3As should interact with governments,  
to name only a few topics.

Some of the subscribers’ addresses are those of the offices of U3As but the majority are individual U3A members. Many of those individuals act as the “postbox” for their U3A and feed back, to their management committee, items likely to interest them. As the number of subscribers grows, the stage will be reached at which almost every U3A in Australia will have access, in one form or another, to U3ATalk. This may also reduce the need or desire to establish a national U3A association.

## **Increased community recognition of U3As**

From being a rarity, U3As have become recognised as having an established place within their communities. In Victoria, for example, most U3As have gained recognition as “Community Based Providers” by the regional councils of the government agency, the Adult, Community and Further Education Board, which oversees and funds that field of education. The Network organisation is recognised by that Board as one of the four “Peak Bodies” in the State in the field of Adult and Community Education. U3As now are part of the mainstream spectrum of educational providers in that field and frequently interact with other providers. Other forms of recognition are common. U3As are acknowledged by many municipalities as active contributors to the range of services available to local communities. Doctors have been known to recommend, to some of their older patients, that they join U3As. Another spin-off from increased recognition is that less and less often do we need, in discussion with politicians and public servants, to begin by explaining what U3As are and what they do. Increasingly we find that those people have parents who are U3A members!

In its relatively short life the U3A movement in Australia has achieved significant recognition throughout the country. Despite the lack of a national U3A structure, Third Age learning is taken seriously by governments. A major review of the field of Adult and Community Education, conducted by a committee of the Australian parliament in 1990-91 contained the first acknowledgement, at that level, of the U3A movement. It recommended, among other things, *that State and Territory governments reflect in their policies and planning related to the aged the proven benefits of sustained educational activity into the so-called third age.*<sup>2</sup> This, and some of the other recommendations of that Report, reflect the point made earlier that the national government does not have a direct role in many matters affecting U3As. However its encouragement is welcomed, even if its recommendations are not always taken up by other bodies.

A subsequent (1997) report by the same parliamentary committee, enquiring into the impact of the earlier report and developments in the field since then, provided a more extensive account of Adult and Community Education and older Australians, with particular reference to the U3A movement.<sup>3</sup> It produced interesting recommendations on further study of the relationship between intellectual activity and good health and on the establishment of *a steering group drawn from relevant government departments to develop and implement a nationwide promotional campaign on the benefits of participation by older people in adult education*

More recently, a committee of the parliament of Victoria conducted an extensive Inquiry into Planning for Positive Ageing which was asked, among other things, to identify the key factors that contribute to individuals remaining confident, independent and in control of their lives.<sup>4</sup> The U3A Network–Victoria and many individual U3As made submissions to this Inquiry and its extensive report may be of significant influence in the State. Among its recommendations are several relating to lifelong learning and one of these is that the University of the Third Age be recognised for its contribution to the learning and educational opportunities of older Victorians ...

## **2 THE AIMS OF AUSTRALIAN U3As**

### **Expressed aims of the U3As themselves**

From the discussion of the absence of a national organisation, above, it follows that there is no “national charter” or agreed set of principles and aims, to which an organisation must subscribe, in order to be recognised as a University of the Third Age. The concept of what constitutes a U3A

has spread, informally, largely based on documents generated in Melbourne in the early days of the movement. These were strongly influenced by the statement of “Objects, Principles and Institutional Form”, drawn up for the first English U3A, at Cambridge, by Dr Peter Laslett, one of its founders.<sup>5</sup>

Australian U3As, being all independent bodies, are therefore free to determine their own statements of their purposes or objectives. Nevertheless, the degree of communication between them is such that there are many common elements to be found in such documents. The following set of statements of purposes comes from one of the longer-established U3As (Chadstone, Victoria) and has been used as a model for many others.

- 1 To provide, for mature people in complete or partial retirement from paid employment, or at home, programs of learning activities – and the social contacts arising from such programs – which will give stimulation and development to their lives.
- 2 To create an Association in which there is no distinction, in terms of its membership, between those who teach and those who learn, and where as much as possible of the activity is voluntary, freely given by members of the Association to their fellows.
- 3 To operate this Association in such ways that learning is pursued without any reference to entry criteria, qualifications, assessment or awards.

These first three statements provide the framework for the day-to-day operations of the U3A and would almost certainly be found, in one form or another, in the constitution of every Australian U3A established to date. The U3A Network–Victoria, in considering new applications for membership, looks for statements such as these in the applicants’ documentation, as one of the criteria for their acceptance as *bona fide* U3As.

The remaining statements in this set are also commonly found in U3A constitutions:

- 4 To assist in dispelling the notion of intellectual decline with age, by making others aware of the intellectual, cultural and aesthetic potentialities of older adults.
- 5 To assist, where appropriate, investigations into the process of ageing in society and the condition of the elderly in our community.
- 6 To exchange ideas and resources with Universities of the Third Age, both in Australia and overseas.
- 7 To encourage the establishment of similar organisations in other parts of Australia.

While those matters may not be among the daily priorities of a U3A they are certainly not neglected. The accounts, above, of cooperation between U3As and of their recognition by governments, attest to this.

### **Learning structures set up to pursue these aims**

Among the larger Australian U3As—i.e. those with 100 or more members—the usual program is one of weekly activities, each of 1½ to 2 hours’ duration. Interestingly, the number of activities in the weekly program usually turns out to be of the order of 8% to 10% of the total membership, so that a 100-member U3A is likely to have 8 to 10 activities in its program and a 1000-member group will have 80 to 100. There will be a Program Coordinator or a Program Committee, with the task of recruiting activity leaders or tutors. Most often, this is a matter of finding members willing to lead activities, matching the activities to those members’ various areas of expertise and then advertising those activities for enrolments. Occasionally the reverse process is

used—that of identifying a group of members who wish to study in a particular field and then seeking out a suitable activity leader. Either way, the recruitment of these leaders is the crucial part of the process. The number who volunteer without prompting is usually less than the number required and so various techniques are used to find the rest. A not uncommon practice is to ensure that the U3A's membership enrolment form asks about each member's prior occupation or particular interests and the membership lists are then scanned to find suitable people, who are then personally invited to lead activities. Many decline, either because they lack the confidence to accept this role or because they are unwilling to commit themselves to the time needed for preparation. But some do accept, even if hesitantly, and usually find, sometimes to their surprise, that they enjoy the experience.

It is not always necessary for the activity leader to have expertise in the topic concerned. Sometimes the leader's role is that of co-ordinator—of recruiting speakers to lead individual sessions, either from within the group or from outside the U3A. Professional people from research institutes, industry, universities and elsewhere can often be found to give occasional lectures. Those from universities often comment that they get more enjoyment from classes of U3A members than they do from undergraduates—U3A members are there because they want to be and are more responsive, on the whole. Other groups rely on learning kits available from various sources, like those obtainable from an organisation called Learning Circles Australia. Even language classes without tutors have been known to operate, making collective use of tapes and booklets designed for personal self-instruction

The structures within these activities vary widely. Some are run almost entirely as lectures. Others are more like the traditional university tutorial, with “tutorial papers” being prepared by group members, while others operate entirely as discussion groups with the activity leader's role being that of ensuring that all in the group get opportunities to contribute. There is no prescribed formula and each activity usually settles down into a format which is mutually comfortable for the leader and the group. Some groups are limited in size, either because of the room in which they meet or because the leader specifies a limit to suit the style which he or she finds effective. Sometimes a leader is content to run a lecture series to audiences of 50 or more. No constraints based on some concepts of “effective learning” are applied—if a leader can regularly attract and hold a large audience, why not let that happen?

The duration of each activity is also negotiable. Some leaders prefer to run short courses of 6 to 10 sessions and then take a break before repeating or resuming the program. Others are happy to continue indefinitely through the year. Again, there are no pre-determined concepts of what is the “best” format. The main criterion is “Do the members of the group keep coming each week?” Even the curriculum is negotiable. There have been many recorded instances of groups discussing, with the leader, the direction in which the program is heading and reaching mutual agreement about a change of direction—an almost unthinkable process in traditional university teaching!

Most activities need to be planned without any assumptions as to the prior knowledge or skills of members of the group; the statements of purposes, described earlier, imply that. There are some exceptions, of course. In language classes, for example, large U3As often offer, in the same year, different classes in each language at beginners', intermediate and advanced levels.

In smaller U3As, there may not be a weekly class program. One U3A in a small country town, for example, has existed for a decade with a steady membership of 30 to 40 and their strategy is to hold a meeting at the beginning of each year, to decide on the theme of studies for that

year. That done, a program of meetings for the whole group, usually held twice a month, is planned and individual members volunteer, each to research a single topic for each meeting, at which they then act as leader, in whatever form they choose to run it. They are proud of their success with this format.

### **Perceptions of members as to outcomes**

It is interesting that, although what is written about the purposes and practices of Universities of the Third Age tends to focus on the educational opportunities they offer, the first things that come to the minds of U3A members when they are asked what they gain from involvement in U3A activities are usually not the learning outcomes. They tend *not* to say “I have learned a great deal about such-and-such”, but to talk about social outcomes—finding new friends who share their interests, finding a support group which has helped them through difficult periods in their personal life, and so on. In other words learning, for which the U3A basically exists, becomes not the main outcome, but the process through which the more important outcome of personal development takes place.

The accumulation of anecdotes which give this impression has been reinforced by research. An “Active Senior Project”, undertaken in 1995 for the Victorian Adult, Community and Further Education Board and the Department of Sport and Recreation is one such study which supports this view.<sup>6</sup> A major component of the project was the establishment, in widely differing parts of Victoria of a number of “focus groups” of older people already engaged in learning activities. A large number of these were U3A members. Among the many findings of this project was a series under the heading “Benefits of Learning in Later Life”. This summarised the benefits as perceived by the focus groups, in categories as follows:

- provides social contact,
- keeps you up-to-date,
- is less pressured than earlier education,
- personal development,
- life skills and better quality of life,
- power from the learning group,
- keeps brains active; and associated with this, a strong belief that
- learning improves health.

Clearly the social outcomes and those those outcomes associated with various aspects of personal development were the ones which mainly came to the forefront of these discussions. Different studies, conducted in other parts of the country, have been consistent with this result. For example, Dr Alan Williamson, who conducted a series of extended interviews with members of the U3A at Liverpool, a region in south-western Sydney, concluded that *The most potent social consequences of belonging to a U3A are small scale—in the class learning group itself, in the networking through family and friends which ensues; and in the local community where it has met an unfilled social need for learning among a section of Third Agers ... My own conclusion, drawn from the interviews with Liverpool USA members used in this paper, is that for the present generation of Third Agers the sheer joy of learning in the company of like-minded people, and the personal benefits this brings are what stand out most for them.*<sup>7</sup>

## **Wider aims of the U3A movement**

In a number of ways, the U3A movement seeks to do more than just provide quality learning programs for its members. Where the opportunity arises, it has sought to influence community and government thinking about the roles of active, healthy Third Age people in society. In recent years many in government and in government departments have gone on record as advocating lifelong learning as the basis for educational policies and programs. However, when one looks at the outcomes of such advocacy, one finds a strong tendency to appeal to lifelong learning principally—if not solely—in the context of labour market training and retraining. In practice, funded programs for lifelong learning tend to become unavailable at the point of retirement from the workforce, whether this be normal age-related retirement or enforced retirement due to retrenchment at an earlier age. Those active in the U3A movement see this as being foolishly shortsighted. All the available research evidence supports the view that the community as a whole would benefit from a policy of encouraging the habits of lifelong learning on the understanding that this is a process that can continue, with community support, beyond the point of retirement and, indeed, throughout life. Acceptance of this position would lead to programs of resourcing support, not only for U3As but also for many other community-based organisations which work with retired people and with those in the pre-retirement phase of their lives. This line of thinking is consistent with items 4 and 5 of the “typical” set of statement of purposes quoted earlier and has been evident in many of the submissions which U3As and their regional associations have put to governments and to government departments.

A related policy issue is that of involvement in decision-making. It has been quite usual for various government departments to set up committees to provide advice on, to plan or even to operate various services for older people in the community and for such a committee to include not a single older person! From our point of view, this amounts to Second Age people making decisions, solely from their perspective, about what Third Age people need. The U3A movement generally aims to promote the idea that Third Age people ought to be directly represented in decision-making which affects them. Retirement from the work force does not imply a sudden inability to think constructively or to be involved with decision-making.

Support for intergenerational education programs, which has been in vogue in some European circles in recent years, is not usually an aim of Australian U3As. There are many other learning structures available—for example, many Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, which are open to all adults. U3As see themselves as providing an alternative for those older adults who prefer to learn in the company of other older people. Nevertheless there have been several reported instances of U3As involving themselves with groups of younger people. A recent example is that of a secondary school which has many pupils who, for a variety of reasons, have difficulty with reading. It recruited several members of the local U3A who volunteered to read, with those pupils, on a regular basis. The school has publicly recorded its appreciation of this U3A support.

## **Networking and international involvement**

Many individual U3As include, in their aims, statements such as that quoted earlier:

- to exchange ideas and resources with Universities of the Third Age, both in Australia and overseas.

Among the aims of the U3A Network-Victoria one finds

- to represent the U3As in Victoria ... in dealings with ... interstate and overseas U3As ...

In general, the desire among U3A members to pursue such aims actively is not strong. The vast majority are, naturally enough, solely concerned with the week-to-week programs of their U3As. However there is a significant minority who see the advantages which interstate and international networking can bring and who have been active in this field. U3ATalk, described earlier, is just the latest manifestation of this trend. Contacts with the Third Age Trust, in the UK, were first made as far back as 1982, even before the first U3As appeared in Australia, and have been maintained, by several individual Australian U3A members, ever since then. Others have established contacts with organisations like the Elderhostel Network of Institutes for Learning in Retirement, in the USA (those ILRs have much in common with U3As), the China Association of Universities for the Aged, Third Age Learning International Studies (TALIS), the Association for Educational Gerontology and, of course, the International Association of Universities of the Third Age.

The very low level of Australian membership of the AIUTA deserves some special mention. Contact was made soon after one of the first Australian U3As was set up in association with Monash University. Despite this association being a very loose one—the university provided only the use of its name and rental of some accommodation—it was sufficient for Monash U3A to be admitted to titular membership of the AIUTA. Monash U3A took that step in order to provide a link for passing on, to other Victorian U3As, information about the international U3A movement. This was seen as an interim step, prior to establishing a more formal relationship between the U3A movement in Victoria and the AIUTA at some future date. Later, after the U3A Network–Victoria was founded in 1988 it decided, with some reservations, to apply for associate membership as a regional association of UTAs. Its reservations related to the AIUTA constitution which, at the time, contained the provision that only groups having an association with some institution of higher learning could obtain titular (and hence, voting) membership of the AIUTA. This distinction as to what constituted a “proper” UTA seemed, to us, rather artificial. From our perspective, it appeared that the essential objectives of both the university-related UTAs and the U3As in the UK and in our country, insofar as they were concerned with the promotion of continued intellectual activity among older people, were indistinguishable. The main difference in their practices seemed to lie in whether or not the activities they offered carried some kind of “seal of quality approval” of a university. Knowing, as many of us do do, the variable quality of university teaching, this seemed to us to be a distinction unlikely to guarantee any differences in learning outcomes and one of questionable value to learners who are not seeking any qualification from their studies.

Having achieved associate member status the U3A Network–Victoria looked forward to receiving some benefit from being a member of the AIUTA. We have been continually disappointed in this. The AIUTA’s Congresses, as advertised (and as experienced by the few Australian U3A members who have attended them) may be stimulating to individuals but they have little to do with the interests of the AIUTA’s members—the UTAs and U3As. Nothing on their programs appears to be explicitly designed to promote interaction between representatives of those members in areas of educational and organisational interest such as program design, recruitment of activity leaders, experience in operating particular activities (like computer classes, for example), uses of educational technology, strategies for obtaining financial support, problems of finding accommodation for classes, and so on. In between Congresses, the AIUTA appears to do little for its members. A brief

newsletter, which made its appearance a few years ago, was short-lived. No update of lists of AIUTA members and how to contact them has come to us, for years.

It seems to many of us, in Australia, that the AIUTA has already been overtaken, in terms of international usefulness to UTAs and U3As, by other organisations. Let me remind you of the kinds of useful information which I listed, earlier, when talking about a possible national resource centre for Australian U3As. That kind of information exchange, on an international basis, is the sort of thing which the AIUTA might have tried to provide for its members. Now, however, it is probably too late for it to start doing so, since there are already many sources of such exchanges of ideas and information readily accessible on the internet. For example:

- The home page of Harrow U3A, in the UK, at <http://www.limedene.demon.co.uk> is now well established and contains much useful information, including links to the home pages of 63 other U3As and similar organisations in the UK, other European countries, Canada, the USA and Australia.
- The Third Age Trust, the national organisation of U3As in the UK, is establishing its new home page at <http://www.u3a.org.uk>
- The European Network, Learning in Later Life (LiLL) has a very useful home page, in four languages, at <http://www.uni-ulm.de/LiLL>
- A U3A discussion group like U3ATalk can be accessed through the e-mail address [u3a@maelstrom.stjohns.edu](mailto:u3a@maelstrom.stjohns.edu)
- A commercial Third Age site which offers a daily news service, largely concerned with items and discussions of interest within the USA but nevertheless carrying some items of wider interest, can be found at <http://www.thirdage.com>

Admittedly, these resources are predominantly in the English language, but the examples of the LiLL group and of the European home pages accessible through Harrow U3A show that the availability of Third Age learning information on the internet is becoming a truly international phenomenon and that this is happening, regrettably, without input from the the AIUTA.

### **3 THE PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH GROWTH AND THE PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE GROWTH**

Why should growth present problems in the U3A movement? In the Australian experience, there are three problem areas. The first is that of accommodation. No Australian U3A has its own premises. All, except some small ones which hold their meetings in members' homes, rely on the goodwill of other organisations to some extent. The largest source of assistance with accommodation is local government, but many other organisations, such as universities, technical institutes, other community educational providers, schools and churches, find some space for U3A offices and classrooms. Sometimes this accommodation is offered freely but more usually some form of rental is charged. When rentals are charged, however, they are almost always much lower than commercial rates. Financially, therefore, the rental of premises although it may, in some cases, use up 40% or more of the U3A's income is something of a problem, but not, overall, a serious one. The real difficulty arises when growth requires expansion into additional classroom space. That is becoming, for some U3As, increasingly difficult to find at less than commercial rental rates.

The second difficulty associated with growth is that of expanding the program to accommodate an increased membership. More activities on the program require more activity leaders and these, as indicated earlier, are not always easy to recruit.

The third difficulty is, for some U3As, that of continuing to administer the organisation on a purely voluntary basis. Consider a large U3A with 1000 members. It will, typically, operate a program of about 80 weekly classes, together with many short courses, special lectures, etc. It may hold classes at several sites, a few kilometres distant from one another. The administrative work required of its management committee and its program coordinators is then formidable. Some volunteers thrive on such work and appear to do it on almost a full-time basis. But such people are rare; and additionally the organisation runs the risk of relying on them so heavily that if, for example, they become ill there is no-one else who has the same breadth of knowledge of what needs to be done and how to do it.

As to the prospects for growth, present indications are the the movement will grow for some time, both in the numbers of U3As and, for many of them, in their numbers of members. However there are signs that the rate of growth may be slowing. If this is confirmed in coming years it is likely to be due to two factors: some resistance to accepting new members, from U3As experiencing the problems of growth described above, and the absence of the resources needed for promotion of the development of new U3As. On the other hand, these problems may be lessened through the increasing recognition of the value of U3As to the community. Such recognition, in government circles, may well lead to new forms of resourcing becoming available. Recently one of the major national political parties, the Labor Party, has written, into its education policy, support for the U3A movement—the first such recognition in a political party policy. One would not be surprised to find similar support appearing in the policies of the other major political parties since all are aware of the increasing number of Third Age voters and since 1998 is likely to be a national election year. It is unclear as to how any such policy might be put into practice, but its effect would probably be to give U3As access to new avenues of funding. This could assist in overcoming the problems of growth described above. Grants to subsidise rentals would make expansion of accommodation easier. Grants to help meet administrative overheads might ease the pressure on volunteer committees; in some cases, paid administrative assistance might become a possibility.

However, it is also likely that increased government funding would raise some tensions within the U3A movement. There are those who would welcome it and there are those who would see it as threatening the continuation of U3As as voluntary, self-help autonomous organisations, which they feel to be fundamental to their success in Australia. This is an important matter of principle and one we may need to resolve if the U3A movement is to progress and, at the same time, maintain the consensus which now operates, about the “why” and “how” of U3As in Australia.

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<sup>3</sup> *Beyond Cinderella: Towards a learning society*, Report of the Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, Commonwealth of Australia, April 1997, pp 105-112

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<sup>5</sup> This document is reproduced in *A Fresh Map of Life: The emergence of the Third Age* by Peter Laslett, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989

<sup>6</sup> *Living Longer, Learning Later*, a report prepared by Rosalind E Hurworth, Centre for Program Evaluation, The University of Melbourne. Office of Training and Further Education, Victoria, 1995

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