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Educational initiatives for older learners¹

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(Note: In this paper lifelong learning opportunities for older learners in a number of countries are discussed. The programs have different names but for simplicity I will frequently use the term U3A (University of the Third Age) in general discussion to collectively refer to all the programs.)

Successful Ageing

Population ageing has forced governments in many countries to seek creative ways to maximise returns from relatively declining budgets and stretched social support services for the elderly. Recent research suggests that later life adult education programs offer creative and inexpensive ways for assisting older people to engage in the kinds of activity which give them the best chances for maximising their independence in later life.

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. Successful ageing, ageing well, active ageing, healthy ageing, productive ageing and positive ageing are among a number of models of ageing which propose that if people choose to adopt a few sensible lifestyle habits then they stand the best chance of maximizing their own longevity and independence. The key word in this is “choose”. By choosing to follow a regular self-maintenance program throughout life, older people are more likely to carry on successfully to a ripe old age with far less reliance on expensive medical intervention.

The ageing models are outcomes of large studies, many of them involving specialist researchers from many disciplines. They all bear striking similarities in that they focus on positive ways in which the individual can intervene in the ageing process rather than focussing on loss and dependence. In so doing these models have the potential to transform western societies deeply ingrained, condescending mindset that ageing inevitably equates with poor health, decline, and expensive reliance on social services, into a socially acceptable and more accurate understanding of the realities of ageing.

The MacArthur Foundation Study of Successful Aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1999) illustrates the substantial gains in understanding of ageing that can flow from a large, interdisciplinary research approach. The study, which was actually a coherent set of dozens of individual research projects led by 16 researchers from across the broad spectrum of gerontology including biology, neuroscience, neuropsychology, epidemiology, sociology, genetics, psychology, neurology, physiology and geriatric medicine, was the most extensive and comprehensive multidisciplinary study on ageing in America. The Successful Ageing model, which was an outcome of the collective findings, outlines three fundamental attributes of a successfully ageing individual. These are:

- low risk of disease and disease-related disability;
- high mental and physical function;
- active engagement with life.

¹ This paper has been adapted from a paper presented in January 2009 for the launch of the Hong Kong Elder Academy at the Hong Kong Institute of Education.

Each of the three components of the model is important in itself. However they may be somewhat hierarchical in that the absence of disease and disability may make it easier to maintain mental and physical function, and this in turn may enable, but not guarantee, engagement with life.

Low risk of disease and disease-related disability

Many people consider that the risk of disease is entirely down to the lottery of genetics; did we choose our parents wisely? The role of genetics in successful ageing is important but the influence appears to have been considerably overstated. Family studies, population studies, adoption studies, and studies of twins, which were all components of the MacArthur Study, allowed the interplay between nature and nurture to be separated. For all but the most strongly determined genetic diseases, environment and lifestyle have a powerful impact on the likelihood of actually developing the disorder (Rowe and Kahn, 1999). Thus, decisions to cut out smoking, eat less fat and red meat, eat lots of fruit, vegetables and fish, reduce alcohol intake, lose weight, avoid over exposure to sunlight, and exercise regularly, are some of the well-publicised environmental and lifestyle modifications that directly lower the risk of disease and disability.

But what happens if, despite all our precautions, life threatening disease strikes? It seems that even after health problems occur, older people can successfully continue to engage with life if they adopt health control strategies like seeking help, devoting time and energy to addressing the challenges, and being committed to overcoming threats to physical health. For example, in a recent two-year follow-up study, Wrosch and Schulz (2008) found that elderly participants who were proactive and persistent in countering health problems showed greater physical and mental health benefits than those who were not. Their findings suggest that once disease strikes, active control strategies play an important role in the maintenance of older adults' physical health.

High mental and physical function

a) Maintaining high mental function.

For the many older adults who regularly take part in U3A (University of the Third Age) courses around the world maintaining high cognitive function would probably be *the* priority among all elements of the Successful Ageing model. After all, if the brain is no longer functioning effectively, could or would an individual continue to carry out the other elements of the model? As explained later in this paper, U3As provide a diverse range of interesting new learning opportunities and these activities are important because they offer members a way to regularly keep the grey matter churning.

The old dog can indeed be taught new tricks. Engaging in novel learning experiences results in new synapses (links) forming between brain cells, even in people aged 90 and older. These links provide the bridges for chemical messages to stimulate brain cells and the combination of many links is believed to be the basis for memory and learning. Importantly, memory and learning can be revitalised even quite late in life. This finding arose in part from a longitudinal study in which the lives of more than 1000 high functioning older people were followed for eight years to determine the factors that might predict successful physical and mental ageing. Perhaps of no surprise to adult educators many 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*" (Rowe and Kahn, 1999. p. 130). Education was found to be the strongest predictor of sustained mental function in later life. The authors speculated on two possible effects that could explain this link. First, education in early life may have a direct beneficial effect on brain circuitry; or second, education may set a lifelong pattern (e.g. reading, chess, Mah-jong, bridge, 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).

Perhaps the most compelling recent summation of the potential contribution that adult learning can make to wider society came from The Foresight Project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing (Beddington et al, 2008). The project took a whole-of-life approach in reaching its conclusion that countries must learn how to capitalize on their citizen's cognitive resources if they are to prosper. More than 450 experts and stakeholders from 16 countries were involved in the review of state-of-the-art scientific and other evidence to investigate the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in the next 20 years. The recommendations regarding older learners were particularly noteworthy. The study recommended that "*as people move into older age, learning should be encouraged and actively promoted, as this can protect against cognitive decline*" (p. 1058).

This is an excellent message to spread – lifelong learning is good for your health. However, there's more thought-provoking substance within the Successful Ageing model.

b) Maintaining high physical function

The benefits of exercise have been known for many years. Numerous studies continue to show that exercise reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease and overall mortality risk, as well as promoting psychological well-being. Interestingly, Rowe and Kahn's research suggested that if we had to focus on only one element of the Successful Ageing model it should be maintaining a regular exercise routine. A regular combination of stretching, strengthening, balance and cardio-vascular exercises appears to have wide-ranging physiological benefits including, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, promoting cognitive function (Lautenschlager et al. 2008). Exactly why exercise has a positive effect on brain function is not yet known. One suggestion is that exercise helps to maintain the health of blood vessels in the brain, helping to ensure a steady supply of oxygen and nutrients to areas of the brain that are critical for thinking and memory. Physical activity may also stimulate the release of factors critical for brain cell growth, increasing resistance to damage caused by dementia. Andel and colleagues (2008) studied exercise patterns in 50 year olds and followed up 30 years later. They found that exercise at midlife reduces the odds of dementia in older adulthood and concluded that exercise interventions should be explored as a potential strategy for delaying disease onset.

The sound mind-sound body maxim appears to be alive and well in many U3A groups where exercise of various kinds is an important element of many U3A programs - yoga, tai chi, aquarobics, dance, field trips etc.

Active engagement with life

In the Successful Aging model there are two separate elements to actively engaging with life namely; maintaining close social networks and doing interesting things.

a) Maintaining social networks

It's an unfortunate fact of life that the closer we are to the wrong end of the life continuum the greater the chance becomes of losing important social networks. The most devastating of the risk factors is of course death of a very close friend or spouse. However there are many other risks to social networks including divorce, retiring to a new location, giving up driving, prolonged bouts of ill health or incapacity and caring for a sick friend or spouse. The impact of these and similar unexpected calamitous events on older persons' social networks is readily apparent from demographic data that are routinely available in many countries. As an example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that the average adult in 1999 spends about three hours alone each day. In contrast, a man aged over 65 living alone is likely to spend 12 hours a day on his own, which represents 83% of his waking life. A woman of similar age, living alone, will spend about 78% of her waking life alone.

Without special friends we run the risk of entering a downward spiral of depression, leading to further ill health, leading to greater depression and perhaps the danger of loss of independence or, in the extreme, suicide. Indeed, the importance of social networks is one of the most enduring of findings from social science research (Bowling 1994). Study after study shows that a small group of special friends is essential to well-being throughout life. The special friends are those we turn to for advice and support to get us through those low periods when the going gets tough. Social networks are so strongly linked to health and general well-being that a paper published as long ago as 1988 in the journal *Science* equated the health risks caused by fragmentation of social networks with those associated with the early years of smoking (House et al, 1988). Recent findings continue to refine the specific benefits of social networks. For example, Ertel, Glymour and Berkman's (2008) nationally representative study provided evidence that social integration delays memory loss among elderly Americans.

Unfortunately, the world is becoming an increasingly lonely place and social networks have become harder to retain or renew in the rush of everyday life. Neighbours come and go without engaging with their communities; the pressure of working life keeps growing; jobs keep changing; individuals feel they have less of a voice in society; new demands are placed on members of society to keep up with technological "innovations", particularly those associated with computers, and so on. The increasing rush has disempowered many members of society, not just the elderly, leading to a sense of loneliness or isolation from society as shown in the following anomie data for the UK.

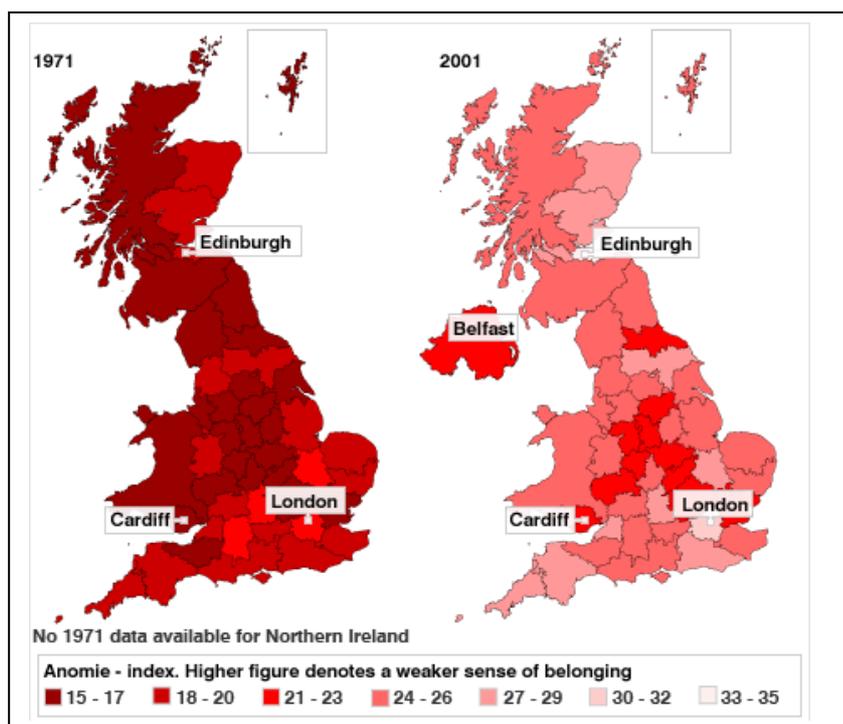


Figure 1: The rise of loneliness, or anomie, which has taken place across the UK over several decades.

The two maps (BBC 2008) show UK citizens' feelings of anomie or sense of alienation and purposelessness in life, with the lighter colours representing a greater sense of powerlessness. The left map for 1971 shows that citizens experienced much lower anomie (darker colours) than they did in 2001. Most telling, however, is the fact that every one of the areas on the right is a lighter colour than any area on the 1971 map.

But what's all this got to do with U3As? By their nature U3As are organisations which attract people with the verve to get-up-and-go, and to keep on engaging with people who share a

common interest. Education is an intrinsically social activity and through sharing common interests such as a particular course, like-minded people meet and new social networks form. In later life the special friends are the ones who tend to keep us on the go with suggestions of visits to the theatre, holidays, dining out and so on and help to provide a reason to get out of bed every day. Adult education activities may be an effective way of combating growing feelings of anomie.

b) Doing interesting things

The second element of actively engaging with life is doing interesting things. Of course the domain of “interesting things” is subjective and open ended. In other words, what is interesting for one older person may hold no attraction at all for another. Consequently, attributing a specific health and well-being outcome to a particular “engaging” activity requires targeted research. Volunteering is a popular example of an interesting activity for many older people and volunteering continues to be widely studied. It seems that everyone can be a winner from voluntarism; participants, recipients of the services, and the wider economy alike. For the volunteers themselves, it seems that those who regularly engage in their voluntary activities enjoy better health and live longer thanks to the stimulating environments and sense of purpose engendered by their activities. Zedlewski and Butrica (2007) summarized the outcomes of 10 studies published since 1999 which documented the significant positive associations between volunteer activity and decreased mortality and depression, improved health and strength, greater happiness, and enhanced cognitive ability. Volunteers are doing themselves a considerable service while helping the wider community.

Successful Ageing Organisations

The Rowe and Kahn model of successful ageing has been criticized for being overly narrow despite their emphasis being on a lot more than physical health. For example, many older people continue to rate their subjective health highly even though they have quite severe health problems of a kind which would earn them a “poor health” rating from a narrow medical perspective. In addition, a more complete successful ageing model must include recognition of existential aspects of life which are important to many older people, such as spirituality (not just in the narrow doctrinal sense) (Glass, 2003). Despite criticism, however, the five elements which make up the three components of the successful aging model, namely:

- low risk of disease and disease-related disability;
- maintaining high mental function;
- maintaining high physical function;
- maintaining strong social networks; and
- doing interesting things;

provide a convenient, evidence-based checklist which can help older people to monitor their choices.

Earlier, it was noted that societies must learn how to capitalize on their citizen’s cognitive resources if they are to prosper. The Foresight Project singles out the need to encourage and actively promote learning in older age as this can protect against cognitive decline (Beddington et al., 2008). In many countries, the latter end of the lifelong learning spectrum has been poorly supported by governments and policy makers. For the most part, any financial support for later life learning opportunities has focused on upgrading older workers’ skills so that they can continue in, or return to the paid workforce. For the very large and growing population of third agers who are no longer in the paid workforce, the benefits of later life learning need to be recognised and supported at the policy level. However, in spite of a lack of top-down support, a number of later life learning initiatives have prospered in many countries in answer to the grassroots groundswell of interest by many retired people in doing something meaningful with their minds.

Some major later life learning initiatives

University of the Third Age (U3A)

Two University of the Third Age models

(Adapted from Swindell and Thompson (1995))

Two distinctly different approaches to Universities of the Third Age have been successfully adopted by many countries and there is considerable variation within each of these approaches. The original French model (UTA) involved learning taking place in traditional university systems. In contrast, the British model (U3A), which developed some years later, is largely of a self-help kind with little or no support from external sources. Other approaches, which incorporate some of the features of each of these "parent" models, have evolved to suit local conditions.

The French Model

An appropriate political climate for the evolution of an idea like UTA was established in France in 1968 when legislation was passed requiring universities to provide more community education. In 1973 a highly rated gerontology course, run by Toulouse University of Social Sciences exclusively for local retired people, led to the formation of the first UTA. The UTA was open to anyone over retirement age; no qualifications or examinations were required or offered, and fees were kept to a minimum. By 1975 the idea had spread to other French universities as well as to universities in Belgium, Switzerland, Poland, Italy, Spain and across the Atlantic to Sherbrooke in Quebec and San Diego in California. (Despite this early beginning in the USA, the U3A movement was overshadowed by LLIs [see the later section on North America] which operate in a very similar way. There was no need in the USA for an almost identical approach to later life adult education.)

Different UTA approaches began to develop by the late 1970s, even within France, including several which were a direct creation of local government and not connected with a university. The original focus on older people by universities also began to broaden to include other educationally disadvantaged groups. In many places the programs were advertised for early retirees, housewives, the unemployed and those with physical handicaps. Some UTAs were renamed to reflect the changing emphasis, for example, University of Leisure Time, and Inter-Age University.

Courses vary widely in content, style of presentation and format. In general they exhibit a mixture of open lectures, negotiated access to established university courses, contracted courses, study groups, workshops, excursions and physical health programs. Content is mainly in the humanities and arts. Funding also varies considerably. Some UTAs are largely university funded; some are funded by a combination of fees, donations, and direct financial subsidy from the local township; and some are mainly member-funded on a sliding scale, depending on participants' assets.

The British Model

UTA underwent a substantial change when it reached Cambridge in 1981 and the abbreviation for University of the Third Age became U3A to reflect a different approach. Rather than relying on university good will the founders of the British model adopted an approach in which there was to be no distinction between the teachers and the taught (Laslett, 1989). Members would be the teachers as well as the learners and, where possible, members should engage in research activities. The "self-help" ideal was based on the knowledge that experts of every kind retire, thus, there should be no need for older learners to have to rely on paid or unpaid Second Age teachers. Laslett provided a substantial rationale for this approach.

The self-help approach has been highly successful in Britain as well as in other countries such as Australia and New Zealand. Some of the strengths of the approach include: minimal

membership fees; accessible classes run in community halls, libraries, private homes, schools, and so forth; flexible timetables and negotiable curriculum and teaching styles; wide course variety ranging from the highly academic to arts, crafts and physical activity; no academic constraints such as entrance requirements or examinations; and, the opportunity to mix with alert like-minded people who enjoy doing new things. Each U3A is independent and is run by a democratically elected management committee of members.

IAUTA

(Adapted from a 2008 paper by Stanley Miller, President of the International Association of Universities of the Third Age. The paper is yet to be published on the IAUTA website but copies can be obtained by emailing the IAUTA secretariat berengere.delli@ag2r.com and requesting one.)

The International Association of UTAs, IAUTA, which dates from 1975 was set up in order to “federate, all over the world, Universities of the Third Age and organisations, which have different names but which subscribe to its objectives”, of which the principal one is “to constitute, with the support of Universities around the world, an international framework of a lifelong educational nature and concerned with research for, by and with the old”.

As a voluntary body, IAUTA relies heavily on the contributions of its members, individuals, UTA or Associations of UTA in more than 23 countries. Its major public function is an international conference normally held every second year hosted by a member institution. Reference to the Association’s website provides a full list of previous conferences (www.aiuta.org). Behind the scenes, IAUTA encourages international cooperation between UTAs, such as that which produced a study of proverbs across a number of European countries and involving partners in several of those countries. This study has culminated in two publications.

IAUTA also provides a point of contact for individual UTA or UTA associations to create exchanges with fellow UTAs in other countries. For example, recent enquiries are leading to links between U3A in the UK and “partner” organisations in the USA, Japan and Switzerland. The encouragement and support of U3A in different countries, both those with well-established programs or those where the development is just beginning, is another role undertaken by IAUTA. In the past two years, U3A in Poland, Japan and India have all sought the help of IAUTA and, hopefully, benefited from this support.

(Stan Miller provides a brief overview of UTAs/U3As in Europe, Canada and South America later in this paper.)

Australia and New Zealand

The self-help U3A movement began in Australia in 1984 and in New Zealand in 1989. The movement spread rapidly through both countries as a “grassroots” movement which was driven by retired community enthusiasts receiving little or no assistance from governments, NGOs or paid adult educators. By 2009 there were 211 independent U3As in Australia (65,000 members) and 60 in NZ (10,000 members). Each U3A is independent although U3A networks in the Australian States of Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, and Queensland, and in the NZ cities of Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington, have considerably assisted U3A growth and development in their various regions. Since 1998, U3A Online, the world first virtual U3A, has acted as an informal network and resource centre for U3As in both countries and assisted U3A developments by providing online teaching materials and free online services which assist each U3A to better meet its educational and social objectives. In 2008 U3A Online, with three other partners, won the Australian Government \$15 million tender to provide Broadband for Seniors Internet kiosks throughout Australia. This move is expected to assist with the growth and recognition of the wider U3A movement around Australia.

Moves have begun by a number of U3A leaders to start an Australian U3A network but long-standing opposition to any formal organisation of the fiercely independent groups continues to hinder what is seen as a timely development by many U3A leaders. Despite this opposition, cooperation between the various groups continues to grow, particularly through the Internet. In 2008 a large scale study into the characteristics and aspirations of U3As in both countries, and the financial value of U3A was undertaken. The study was carried out by a group of U3A researchers from both countries (Swindell, Vassella, Morgan, & Sayer, 2009).

China

(Adapted from "The Amazing University of the Third Age in China today" Jean Thompson U3A, Great Britain 2002 and revised 2004).

Which country had the largest number of U3As in 2004? The answer is clearly China, with 28,000 U3As and 2.3 million members.

The movement began in the 1980s, about the same time as in the UK and ten years later than the founding of IAUTA (International Association of Universities of the Third Age) in France. The increase in life expectancy and the new social role of older people encouraged the government, the Communist Party of China, to set up a Pensioner Affairs Bureau to look after the interests of older people. In conjunction with the army, big companies and mines, universities and other organisations, a wide variety of U3As have been set up, supported by government help with funding and premises. The government has a long term development plan and has drafted guidelines for the management of U3As. A non-governmental organisation, the China Association of Universities for the Aged, (CAUA) has an important role in developing U3As. It promotes the importance and benefits of U3As to the general public, and to older people themselves, and supports new ventures by gaining government funding. At national and provincial level it has supported local efforts to set up U3As. With 200 million older people aged 65 and upwards, this was a challenging task. With wide disparities between rural and city areas and a vast range of educational levels, U3As have to be flexible to meet the needs of the people. The range of provision runs from primary education for those who have missed out on the educational reforms to post-graduate courses. Great efforts are made to stimulate the special interests of the members. In general, they are not interested in qualifications or vocational training, so the emphasis is on learning, life enrichment, promotion of good health and service to the community. There are normally seven types of course: health care, physical exercises (including Taiji), study courses (including literature, history, geography and foreign languages), skills (including computer skills, finance, cookery, and gardening), arts (including calligraphy, painting, music and dancing) and hobbies, (including travel, photography and stamp collecting) and political topics. Courses may be short-term, or run for one to three years. Teaching is very relaxed and flexible, to suit the students' needs. New methods are constantly being tried, including providing information and setting up discussions on current events, supplying magazines and newspapers, organising study tours and visits, using modern facilities and running exhibitions and competitions. The CAUA is cooperating with the Central Radio/TV University to set up special courses, while new text books are being prepared in cooperation with national publishers. All these efforts are providing inspiration for older people to learn more and to have a better quality of life. Their health improves, as do their communication skills. The senior students can now participate in the development of both traditional and modern culture. China is a strong supporter of IAUTA and sends delegations to all the biennial Congresses.

It was China's turn to host the IAUTA International Congress in 2004. They welcomed colleagues and friends from all over the world at their modern conference centre in Shanghai. There were opportunities to meet their U3A members and share ideas, while optional study tours provided an opportunity to have an insider's view of China's modern and traditional culture. In their own words: 'We warmly welcome the foreign friends to visit China and our U3As. Let us learn from each other, work hand in hand in order to make all the elderly people of the world to have a colourful and happy life.'

More than 200 delegates from 20 different countries had the opportunity to see for themselves the work of the many organisations in Shanghai working with older people and to join in their activities. Mr Li Bengong, Chairman of the China Association for the Elderly, reported that the number of local organisations had now risen to 28,000, with over 2.3 million members. He pointed out that this represented less than 1% of the 300 million older people in China and that a huge task still lay ahead. He noted the differences in the new generation of third agers. They had grown up in the People's Republic but had seen many social and political upheavals. U3As should be aware of this in their provision of new organisations and programmes. Delegates noted the widespread provision in Shanghai of computer classes alongside traditional classes in calligraphy, painting and 'maintenance gymnastics.' Research was continuing into new teaching methods. Volunteers assisted the teachers and 'experts' frequently worked for a nominal salary. The students themselves had concerns beyond vocational skills. Mr Lu Jianjie noted that 'some of the third age students hold that what they most cherish in the Third Age University is not the knowledge and skills they have learned, but the comfort for their soul they received in the warm group they live in.'

(Note: It is difficult to get up-to-date information on the rapidly growing U3As in China. A valuable research project for the Hong Kong Elder Academies might be to undertake a regular update of information about the growth and success of the U3A movement in China.)

Hong Kong

(Information provided by Dr Leong Che-hung – Chairman of the Elderly Commission; and by the Elderly Commission Secretariat; and from the EA website <http://www.elderacademy.org.hk>)

To encourage life-long learning and promote the spirit of active ageing and pursuit of a vigorous and fruitful life amongst the elders, the Labour and Welfare Bureau (LWB) and the Elderly Commission (EC) launched the Elder Academy (EA) Scheme in early 2007. Interested school sponsoring bodies may partner with local volunteer welfare organisations (WOs) and establish EAs at the campuses of the existing primary or secondary schools. With the support of schools and WOs, 78 EAs have been set up in various districts and they are well received by elders.

The establishment of EAs serves multiple objectives:

(1) To promote life-long learning

Learning is essential for achieving a fulfilled life. The establishment of EAs helps to promote the message of continuous learning and encourage elders to make the best use of their time and to keep pace with the times through acquiring new knowledge and learning new skills.

(2) To maintain healthy physical and mental well-being

Elders who attend EAs can lead a healthy and fulfilled life. Through learning, they can identify new objectives in life and enhance their sense of achievement and self-confidence in dealing with the changes in daily life.

(3) To realise the objective of fostering a sense of worthiness in elders

The EAs will offer a platform for elders to share their knowledge, demonstrate their creativity, serve the community and continue to make contributions to our society.

(4) To optimise existing resources

The setting up of EAs can optimise the use of existing resources of schools in various districts. Schools are generally equipped with the resources and basic facilities (such as students, teachers, alumni, retired teachers, parents' association, halls and special facilities such as computer room and library, etc.) required for learning programmes. If schools offer their school campuses for EAs to hold courses after school hours (e.g. between 4:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. during weekdays) and at weekends, the administrative cost for running elder learning programmes can be kept to a minimum.

(5) To promote harmony between the elders and the young

Young students may enhance communication with the elders through participating in the activities of the EAs. This will not only expand the social network of the elders and young students, but also promote intergenerational harmony and rapport.

(6) To strengthen civic education

School students (especially the uniformed groups such as the Scout Association and the Red Cross or groups for other extra-curricular activities) may offer volunteer services to the elders at school campuses. This may in turn promote civic education and foster community spirit among the students.

(7) To promote cross-sectoral harmony

Collaboration with school stakeholders, tertiary institutions and WOs, including District Elderly Community Centres and Neighbourhood Elderly Centres, is crucial to the implementation of the EA Scheme. The establishment of the EAs will also help to strengthen the ties between the schools and local community

The curricula of the EAs at primary and secondary schools comprise both compulsory (health courses) and elective courses tailored to meet the diverse needs of elders with different abilities and socio-economic backgrounds. Courses for elders aim at raising their standard of living by building up their capability for self-care and adjusting to life in old age.

Apart from academic studies, arts, craft and sports may also be included. Besides, there is no academic barrier, such as entry requirement or examination. Instead, the EA are to offer opportunities for elders in networking and pursuing a dynamic life.

Many elders look for a chance to study in universities while some others hope to enrol in academic and in-depth learning programmes. Therefore, in 2008 the EA Scheme was expanded to tertiary level. This move was supported by the tertiary institutions. At present, seven tertiary institutions have participated in the EA Scheme. One of these is The Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIE). The HKIE is developing a program of research into learning and educational engagement by older adults in the Hong Kong cultural context. A recent study is exploring how older adults see themselves as learners, what they see as being the impact of learning on them, and what factors influence their active engagement in learning. A related research project in the planning stages is a comparative study of the form and impact of educational policy and provision for older learners. HKIE is also developing a set of resources and professional development opportunities to help older adults develop confidence and skill in working as tutors - both in education directed to older adults and in education more generally. (*See the section on constituency research towards the end of this paper.*)

India

(Information provided by Professor R N Kapoor, Founder/Chairman Indian Society of U3As)

The first Indian U3A was started in 2007 at Rewa in Madhya Pradesh and in less than two years had grown to more than 40 U3As throughout the country. This rapid growth has been due to the early formation in 2008 of a national council, the Indian Society of U3As (ISU3A), which is dedicated to the development of U3A nationally throughout five zones. ISU3A describes itself as “a group of loosely knit individuals - academicians and practitioners in the field of Ageing in India who have come together for the purpose of spreading the U3A concept across India”. Because more than 60% of the Indian population resides in rural areas, ISU3A is concentrating on devising ways to spread U3A amongst villagers. For example, one U3A has “adopted” a nearby village and is assisting the villagers in providing basic amenities and education, and helping them to obtain benefits from various rural area benefit schemes launched by government. The first successful rural U3A was developed in Madhya Pradesh and in villages surrounding Chitrakoot. Lack of Internet facilities and lack of general awareness by the population of the “unusual” U3A approach to education is seen an obstacle to growth.

In partnership with Chitrakoot University, ISU3A is hosting the first World U3A Conference at Chitrakoot in February 2010 under the theme, Lifelong Learning and Ageing with Dignity. Details of the conference can be found at <http://worldu3aconference2010.org/index.htm>

(More details via the ISU3A website <http://www.u3aindia.org/> and by subscribing to the free email newsletter tom@worldu3a.org)

Nepal

(Information provided by Jeevan Raj Lohani, Coordinator Council of U3As in Nepal)

U3As in Nepal started in 2006 with support from Tom Holloway, co-founder of World U3A, and some educational professionals and elderly groups. The 'Council of U3As in Nepal', which is a core committee representing all U3As in Nepal, was formed in 2006 and registered as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in 2008. Activities within the Nepal U3A movement include (i) organization of discussion programs, (ii) supporting education related workshops, (iii) forming new groups, and (iv) providing technical assistance to support university activities.

The Council of U3As in Nepal believes key areas for Nepal and similar countries to consider are (i) financing U3As (ii) adaptation of U3As in the culture of developing countries and (iii) cooperation and coordination with other U3As throughout the world.

(More details from <http://www.u3anepal.org/>)

North America

(Information on LLIs provided by Nancy Merz-Nordstrom – Director: Elderhostel Institute Network (EIN). Information on Elderhostel and OLLIs was obtained from their respective websites. (<http://www.elderhostel.org/>); (<http://www.osherfoundation.org/>))

Lifelong Learning Institutes (LLIs)

Imagine a school without grades or tests, a place where the only prerequisites are an active mind and a desire to learn in a congenial atmosphere. Fill the classrooms with dedicated students of retirement age, forming a community of learners who design their own college-level curriculum according to their own needs and interests, people whose common bonds are intellectual curiosity and the experience of their generation. They share opinions, knowledge, and expertise with humour, creativity and mutual respect. When classes are over, the lively discussions don't end. The talk spills out to the hallways, the cafeteria, or the student lounge. Younger students passing through are impressed by the vitality of this enthusiastic bunch. Learning is obviously lots of fun. That brief summation captures the spirit of the Lifelong Learning Institutes or LLI movement in North America.

The first LLIs trace their roots back to 1962 when the Institute for Retired Professionals was started in New York City under the sponsorship of the New School for Social Research. During the next 26 years, until the formation of the Elderhostel Institute Network in 1988, the idea spread relatively slowly, primarily by word of mouth with little media attention. By 1988 there were about 50 separate LLI groups. *(Note: The LLI movement started about a decade before the U3A movement. However, because U3A is a known "brand name" in many countries the North American approaches have been subsumed under the U3A heading.)*

LLIs are called by many names, with each being a unique organization reflecting the needs and goals of its sponsoring campus and participants from the local community. Several years ago many of the current LLIs changed their name from Institutes for Learning in Retirement because market surveys showed that young North American retirees do not want to join organisations labelled as being for retirees.

Elderhostel

In 1975 the Elderhostel organisation was formed to provide short, university-based adult education courses for older adults. The concept involved inviting older adults from anywhere in the USA to live as students on a university campus for about a week during student vacations and taking intensive mini-courses, usually taught by paid members of the faculty. Elderhostel is a not-for-profit organisation. However costs must be covered and course participants are required to pay for travel, accommodation, teaching fees and other expenses associated with their week of study at a distant campus. The fees would deter many would-be older learners with limited resources. Despite this, the programs are very popular with older adults and Elderhostel is now the world's largest, educational travel organization.

In 1988, twenty-four LLIs collaborated with Elderhostel to form the Elderhostel Institute Network (EIN), with a mission to strengthen and support the effectiveness of both programs and spread the LLI concept to new communities. The EIN has been effective at promoting the rapid growth of LLIs in both the USA and Canada.

Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLIs)

The Bernard Osher Foundation was founded by a prominent Californian businessman to improve quality of life through support for higher education and the arts. In 2000 the Foundation supported the idea of sponsoring OLLIs which would operate in a way similar to the LLIs outlined above. Currently there are more than 120 OLLIs operating in 49 USA States. Like the LLIs there is considerable variation among the OLLIs but the common threads remain: Non-credit educational programs specifically developed for adults who are aged 50 and older; university connection and university support; robust volunteer leadership and sound organizational structure; and a diverse repertoire of intellectually stimulating courses.

United Kingdom

(Information provided by Jean Thompson, co-founder of WorldU3A and U3A Online adviser)

The British model of U3A was started in 1982 when the first local groups were set up. In the absence of support from Universities or Adult Education authorities, members themselves ran interest groups and meetings, often in each others' homes. A National Office was set up to support new groups and to circulate a newssheet. Now in 2009, there are 716 local U3As with 209,000 members. Subject Networks, which were originally set up to link and encourage new groups in such subjects as Languages, Music and Science, and which are open to all members, now number 40. The Coordinators offer support and organise newsletters, Study Days and sometimes residential courses. The quarterly news sheet 'U3A News' is now posted directly to members' homes and it is accompanied by the more recent educational journal 'Sources,' written by members. With a growing number of local groups, regional committees can provide links for their area. Joint activities and get togethers for special occasions are increasing. Other opportunities for members to meet and share ideas flourish at the annual Conference and AGM, held each September in University accommodation, and the popular residential Summer Schools.

Another development, mainly for the benefit of isolated U3A members, is in Online Courses, written and tutored by U3A members and benefitting from sharing resources with colleagues in U3A Online. A UK Virtual U3A with its own interest groups has recently started.

On the international scene, as well as maintaining membership of IAUTA, the WorldU3A website provides links around the world and is currently encouraging U3A initiatives in India, Nepal and Nigeria. A monthly online newsletter called Signposts, run jointly with our U3A Online colleagues, sends news on useful websites directly to an ever-growing number of members.

U3A in brief in some other countries

(Information provided by Stanley Miller, President of IAUTA, the International Association of Universities of the Third Age. A list of IAUTA member contacts can be found on the IAUTA website - <http://aiuta.org/en/universities2.asp>)

Belgium – French speaking Belgium was one of the earliest in the development of U3As beyond France. It has two very active U3As in Louvain-la-Neuve (not Louvain/Leuven) and Namur. The former, with its various branches in Brussels and in other parts of that region has around 5-6000 members. The Namur U3A has been involved in a great deal of cooperative work with U3As in other countries, as well as in some interesting community and intergenerational work.

Czech Republic – There is a federation comprising some 35 U3As, now in membership of IAUTA.

France – In addition to the following list of U3As, there is a federation UFUTA (The French Union of U3As with about 42 members). Toulouse, Vannes, Versailles, Lyon, Creteil, Limoges, Paris 6, Rheims, Orleans, Lille, Melun, Evry, Lannion plus two in overseas 'departments' - Martinique and Noumea. There is also the world-wide francophone welfare association, FIAPA, which brings together national associations, of which IAUTA is part.

Finland – Joensuu, Jyväskylä, Helsinki

Germany – U3As do not exist under that name although there are a number of organisations operating in a similar vein within an overall organisation concerned for the welfare of older people (BAGSO). *(This situation also applies in other European contexts e.g Spain with FATEC which is a Catalan Federation.)* The University of Ulm Centre for Academic Research (ZAWIW) is an internationally renowned centre in the field of e-learning for seniors.

Greece – There is an organisation in Athens called 50plus which embraces the U3A concept.

Italy – At least two large federations of U3As: UNITRE based in Turin and FEDERUNI which is largely based on universities with an interest in lifelong learning. U3As in UNITRE number over 100.

Luxemburg – At least one at Ettelbruch.

Malta – based in Valetta and the university is much involved in gerontological studies.

Netherlands – Gronigen and Nijmegen, both now represented on the IAUTA Governing Board.

Norway – PUNR (Pensjonistuniversitetet Dedre Romerike) which is an independent U3A organisation established in 1993 for the geographical area of Nedre Romerike, north of Oslo. In 2006 there were about 500 members.

Poland – Two U3As in Warsaw, one of which, MUTW, does a great deal of supportive work on behalf of Polish-speaking U3As in Moldavia, Belarus and the Ukraine. There is also a long-standing U3A at the University of Lublin. Both MUTW and Lublin are members of IAUTA.

Portugal – There is a Universities of the Third Age federation called RUTIS which in 2006 had 45 members of the then 70 or so U3As in Portugal. The total number of U3As in 2009 may be nearer 100.

Slovakia - At the Comenius University of Bratislava there is a longstanding and active centre for U3A work directed by Nadezda Hrapkova who is also the Chair of EFOS, the European Federation of Older Students at Universities.

Spain – U3As in Seville, Alicante, Santiago de Compestella, Madrid, Seville, Grenada, Santander, La Coruna, Barcelona (Catalan) as well as expatriate U3As for British and French

living in retirement in Spain. There are also federations APFA/AFOPA and UNATE, which, in the latter case, is again a general welfare organisation but with a learning strand.

Sweden – Gotenberg and Uppsala. This latter is an active member of IAUTA with longstanding representation on the Board.

Switzerland –U3As in Lucerne, Basle, Berne, Giubiasco, Lausanne, Neuchatel, Zurich and Geneva, the latter a particularly internationally oriented U3A whose (retiring) General Secretary, Raymonde Wagner, was for some time General Secretary of IAUTA.

Canada – As with everything Canadian, one has to make the distinction between francophone and anglophone Canada. In the former, Sherbrooke, Quebec and Montreal are important centres of U3A activity. In the latter U3As as such do not exist; the situation is much like in the USA where U3A activities are run under different names (e.g. LLIs, OLLIs). There is a federation/network but, so far, they have shown little interest in international activities.

Latin America – U3As in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica. These are largely individual U3As based on universities.

South Africa – There are perhaps 14 or 15 self-help U3A groups in this country but these appear to be among the non-indigenous population.

(U3As have begun in Singapore, Bangladesh, Japan, Russia, Nigeria and perhaps elsewhere as well. Little or no readily accessible information is available on these. Later in this paper I discuss constituency research. The regular update and sharing of information about all U3A-like adult education programs around the world would be an excellent, inexpensive constituency research project on which to cut our collaborative research teeth. Results could be shared on websites and developed as regular formal publications for adult education journals.)

U3As as Successful Ageing organisations

Although the development of LLIs in North America preceded the first UTA in France, all the programs described above, regardless of their titles, broadly conform to an adaptation of one or other of the French (UTA) or British (U3A self-help) models. In these models retired volunteers play key teaching and administrative roles in their organisations' activities. For convenience the term U3A has been generally used as a collective name to refer to all of these. It should also be noted that in some countries there are distinctive, but quite different educational programs run exclusively for older people, for example Elderhostel. Programs which do not follow the U3A approach fall outside the scope of this paper.

There are many variations on the U3A approach worldwide which provide activities that encompass all or most of the five successful ageing elements (Rowe and Kahn, 1999) discussed above. Some approaches such as the LLIs in North America, or the French U3A model, which are followed in many countries, are based at universities or colleges where members have access to high level learning and teaching resources like libraries and computers. Nevertheless, the teaching and program administration is mainly or solely carried out by skilled retirees, and the formal university system has little or no say over the educational content and process. In China, the Universities for the Aged use a combination of revered older teachers who are paid a stipend, and older and young unpaid volunteers, to teach a curriculum which covers compulsory subjects like health and exercise as well as a wide range of academic and leisure courses. In other countries different combinations of second and third age expertise provide popular programs for older people that encompass most of, or all the elements of the successful ageing model.

Unlike almost any other large, leisure time organization for older people, U3As incorporate all, or at least four of the five elements of Successful Ageing. Classes typically include a panorama of intellectually, physically and socially stimulating options all prepared and run by retired people who are expert in their subject areas. It seems reasonable therefore to describe these later life learning organizations as successful ageing organizations.

Older people and novel communications technologies

Frequently, older people are isolated from their mainstream communities by a daunting array of constraints that make it difficult for them to continue to engage with life. Even in large, well resourced cities which offer many opportunities for older people to do interesting things, abrupt changes to circumstance such as illness, incapacity, or becoming a caregiver, leave many older people with few compensatory options to choose from.

Communications technologies have considerable potential for motivating isolated older people to engage with life in entirely new ways. In the early 1990s a series of studies was undertaken to investigate the possibility of setting up a virtual U3A for frail elderly people with sound minds. The studies showed that older volunteer teachers and learners alike were not averse to using novel technology to learn new things (Swindell and Mayhew, 1996; Swindell, Singer and Singer, 1994; Swindell, James and Mann 1992). In one of the studies, 18 frail elderly people aged from 58 to 92 years old, who were confined to their homes by illness or incapacity, showed measurable improvements in their quality of life over the course of an eight week educational program delivered via teleconference, by volunteer U3A tutors. A trained nurse interacted with the participants throughout the study to monitor basic health data and record observations. The well-being of participants improved over the course of the study and several developed new social networks as a result of interacting with like-minded others within their virtual groups. They stated that the educational program was the catalyst that induced them to experiment with a novel method of communicating and exploring beyond their physically and socially constrained horizons (Swindell and Mayhew, 1996).

Clearly the Internet would have been a more flexible and cost-effective medium than teleconferencing for carrying out the above virtual U3A trials. However, in the early nineties, computers and the Internet were unknown quantities to most retirees. The situation is quite different today. Although a large disparity still exists between the numbers of older and younger Internet users, older people comprise the fastest growing group on the Internet in many countries, albeit from a low user base. The extent of this grey digital divide seems to depend on efforts made within various countries to provide older people with motivation, and assistance to learn to use the Internet. The World Internet Project (2009) reported that in New Zealand, Canada, Sweden and the United States, at least 38 percent of the population aged 65 and older said they go online. In Australia, the number is substantially lower with 29 percent of the population aged 65 and older reporting that they go online. However, the Australian figure could show a marked increase from 2009 after the Australian Government Broadband for Seniors project begins a three year program of providing free Internet kiosks with tutoring provided by older volunteers, throughout the entire country (see <http://www.necseniors.net.au/> for details). By contrast, other countries participating in the World Internet project like Macao, Hungary and the Czech Republic, reported 10 per cent or less of the over 65 population using the Internet. However even those “high” percentages listed above for the over 65 year group are disproportionately low when compared to online usage by the younger population within their respective countries.

Although this grey digital divide seems likely to persist for many years, the foregoing shows that many older people are happy to come to grips with technology that played little or no part in their earlier lives. The potential benefits of the Internet for all older people seem limitless. Free Web 2.0 applications such as wikis, Skype and social networking sites, have considerable scope for widening the range of socially and intellectually enriching activities in the daily lives of older people, allowing them to communicate with like-minded others when

and if they want to. However, using the Internet may have previously unrecognized direct health benefits for older “surfers” because the process may also help to exercise and improve brain function. Recent research with older people who surf the Internet shows that they trigger key centres in the brain involved in decision-making and complex reasoning when they make decisions about what to click on in order to pursue more information. This research, which studies brain activity in real time, showed that Internet searching engages a much greater extent of neural circuitry than reading does (Small et al, 2009).

U3A Online

As discussed earlier, many older people are unable to engage with life within their wider communities because circumstances such as being a caregiver, illness, disability and so forth, isolate them from their social networks and opportunities for intellectual stimulation. The first virtual U3A, U3A Online, was set up in 1998 as an outcome of email discussions between a small group of U3A members from Australia, New Zealand and the UK.

Just like any self-help U3A, all the administration and teaching in U3A Online is carried out by volunteers. No one is paid. Governance and administration takes place through regular online meetings. Discussion and voting takes place by electronic forum, email and Skype. The annual general meetings, at which office bearers are elected, are also held online. In fact, it is highly likely that the majority of volunteers who work closely together for many years, will not physically meet.

Since 2002, Griffith University in Brisbane has hosted the entire operation free of charge on university servers, as part of its service to the wider community. The courses are delivered via the University online course delivery platform, also free of charge. The net result of running a learning organization in which overheads are negligible and no one is paid, is that fees are nominal. For example, in 2009, the annual U3A Online membership fee was A\$25. (For comparison a movie ticket costs about A\$13.) Membership is open to all older people from any country, or younger people with disabilities. By 2009, 36 courses were available to U3A Online members with others in various stages of completion, all written, edited and taught by volunteers. A further 11 courses are available to members through a cooperative arrangement with the Third Age Trust in the UK, which has provided online courses for its members since 2000. Each course runs for eight to ten weeks and is offered two or three times a year, when the volunteer course leader is available. Participants interact with the leader and with others in the course by online forum and email.

The concept has clearly made a difference to the health and quality of life of many isolated older people. For example:

I'll go as far as to say that being totally absorbed in my most recent online course has saved my sanity this year.

I am partially blind with limited short sight. I am extremely grateful to U3A as I now have an interest at home - am happy working on my own and life has again a meaning.

I care for my wife who has Alzheimers. Have done so for the last 8 years.

I like to hear of other people who are doing the course and through it have made email contact with people all over the world. This helps to keep me busy.

Further detail of U3A Online can be found in Appendix A. A description of all courses and links to many other quality-of-life comments from participants can be found on the home page www.u3aonline.org.au

International U3A cooperation

Cooperation among older learners is not a novel idea. The whole concept of U3A is based on cooperation. Large learning networks such as IAUTA, the Third Age Trust in the UK and the

EIN in North America would never have come into being if older learners had not been prepared to share.

However, as demonstrated by the success of U3A Online, the Internet has dramatically increased the possibilities for international cooperation between U3As. Cost, national borders, language, race or creed need no longer serve as barriers to lifelong learners of good will who want to share with other like-minded people anywhere.

Constituency Research

The fundamental strength of the constituency research approach is that it entails research “with” rather than research “on” older people. The difference between “with” and “on” may not matter too much in large scale tick-a-box surveys. However, if much richer findings are needed, these are more likely to arise from interviews carried out by peers who are perceived to have primary empathy with the participants, rather than by younger researchers whose appearance, manner of dress, language, general persona, and time constraints may create barriers to in-depth communication (Swindell, 1992).

U3A is an organisation which seems tailor-made for a leadership role in constituency research. U3As are all about learning and there are few if any learning opportunities which can surpass discovering new knowledge or achieving novel outcomes through applied research. Although U3As are open to all older people, they tend to attract many with higher-than-average educational qualifications and/or those who held leadership positions in their former working lives. These are the people who could become interested in forming an international network of U3A researchers who carry out research studies which could benefit the wider ageing population, nationally and internationally.

A number of edifying research/development programs have been successfully carried out in the past in association with U3A member researchers. The outcomes of these studies could probably not have been achieved without major involvement, or in some cases the sole involvement of retired researchers. One example of a collaborative venture between second and third age researchers was outlined briefly earlier in this paper in which the assistance of U3A tutors was the essential component to the testing of a virtual U3A by teleconference.

“A voice worth listening to” is a recent example of a novel research project undertaken exclusively by third agers (Braxton, Swindell and MacKinlay, 2007). In this project a retired journalist personally interviewed people aged 80 and older in Australia and New Zealand who were continuing to do remarkable things within their communities. The purpose of the research was to debunk the ageist and damaging mindset that advanced chronological age inevitably implies that an older person has become a burden on society. The revealing, and in some cases deeply personal, findings were published in a 160 page book and sent to politicians and advisers, journalists, NGOs, and other influential individuals and organisations associated with ageing. The lead researcher was in her mid 70s. Her age and manner provided the necessary entrée to the private thoughts and recollections of interviewees. She found that many of the participants would not have bothered to speak with young researchers because of the patronising, condescending or offhand attitudes which many young westerners inadvertently show for older people.

Doubtlessly there are many examples of significant constituency research projects which have been carried out by U3A groups in many regions. However, the Internet has opened up a low cost medium for research collaboration by U3As everywhere. Low cost, high impact, constituency research projects carried out by U3A researchers from many countries have the potential to unearth many novel findings which are beyond the reach of conventional research teams and methodologies because of constraints such as time, cost and access. As discussed earlier, updating information about the current status of U3A-like approaches around the world would be a practicable, inexpensive and valuable project to begin with, before moving on to more ambitious projects.

WorldU3A

WorldU3A evolved from the Internetwork site that was set up in 1997 to encourage Internet-based U3A networking in the UK. As U3A members from beyond the UK joined in the email discussions and started to contribute to projects, the name was changed to WorldU3A to reflect a vision of inclusivity involving any U3A member regardless of location. Some of the international projects carried out by email and other technology can be seen on the WorldU3A website at worldu3a.org. One of the most valuable of these projects is the ongoing “technical support” email list involving a network of scores of U3A members with computer and Internet skills who can provide rapid answers to technology-based problems. Another is the mentoring project in which U3A volunteers work by email with children to help them to improve their language competency.

Time witnesses

Timewitnesses, <http://timewitnesses.org/>, is an excellent example of the Internet opening up cooperative ventures for U3A members around the world. Timewitnesses is a “living archive” which allows people from any country who have childhood or adult memories of World War II, to preserve their stories for everyone. It is not only a powerful antiwar statement it is an excellent educational tool freely available to schools around the world. Many of the stories have been translated into German and French and in a number of cases school children assisted with the translations.

Conclusion

This paper began by observing that governments everywhere are seeking inexpensive solutions to challenges associated with population ageing. Preventative actions, in which the population at large adopts lifestyle choices which may delay widespread reliance on expensive health and social support services in later life, appear to hold considerable promise. The various later life education approaches discussed above suggest that they are playing an important but largely unrecognised part in the successful ageing process. This opinion is reinforced by the recommendation from the Foresight Project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing (Beddington et al, 2008) that “*as people move into older age, learning should be encouraged and actively promoted, as this can protect against cognitive decline*” (p. 1058).

The majority of later life learning activities are inexpensive, uncomplicated and have few barriers to participation. They require little in the way of expensive infrastructure to set up and maintain, and most are situated within easy reach of the community. It is not unreasonable therefore to suggest that widespread promotion of the benefits of later life learning should join other government funded public health campaigns that routinely endorse positive measures such as good diet, sensible exercise, reduction in alcohol consumption, not smoking and protection from ultraviolet exposure. Lifelong learning is good for your health!

The self-help, later life learning model is difficult to fault. Experts of all kinds retire, many with the skills, energy, empathy and interest to successfully increase both the number and range of resources available through the inexpensive learning organisations which have been making a substantial difference to the quality of life of large numbers of older people for many years. The approaches have considerable flexibility and are able to reach out to older people who are outside the reach of usual mainstream assistance. For example, in China and India, U3As are empowering people in rural areas who have little opportunity to improve their lives through more conventional means.

As the Internet becomes more accessible to retirees the opportunities to engage in novel learning activities with like-minded colleagues from around the world, will undoubtedly increase. Programs like U3A Online, which started out in 1998 with an international focus, provide a large number of intellectually stimulating courses free to members. Many U3A Online members are isolated from their mainstream communities by distance, or circumstance

such as illness, disability or being a full time carer of a loved one, and the opportunity to share online learning experiences with others is demonstrably making an important contribution to their quality of life. Similarly, cooperative projects of the kind pioneered by WorldU3A, in which retired people use email to mentor students in other countries, show the potential of the U3A approach to mobilise skilled retirees to carry out valuable intergenerational projects via the Internet. Free communications via skype and wikis, open up intriguing possibilities for other cooperative projects run by skilled volunteers.

The history of grassroots driven, later life learning opportunities, run by and for older volunteers, can be traced back to at least 1962 when the first LLI began in New York City. There may be earlier examples in other countries. Regardless, the idea is no transient flash in the pan. As the ageing population grows, successful ageing organisations like U3A appear destined to play an increasingly important part in the total mix of preventative health programs which are aimed not only at maintaining the health and wellbeing of the general population but also at capitalising on older citizens cognitive resources for the greater good.

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Appendix A

U3A Online

www.u3aonline.org.au

U3A Online is the world first virtual U3A. It started in 1998 and since 2001 has operated like any U3A; that is, with an all-volunteer workforce. The major difference is that no one meets face-to-face; all teaching and administration is carried out by volunteers who can live anywhere. For example, members of the management team have come from Poland, the UK, NZ and Australia. Since 2001, Griffith University in Brisbane has freely hosted U3A Online as part of its community service. All courses and interaction are freely delivered through the university's sophisticated flexible learning and teaching software.

From its inception U3A Online has provided resources for U3As in Australia and NZ to assist them to meet their educational objectives. The best known free resources are "Locate a U3A", which is the only systematic way for U3As in both countries to contact each other; and *Signposts*, the free monthly email newsletter jointly edited by U3A Online and World U3A. Other free resources include *Research/Reports* which contains downloadable published papers about U3A and positive ageing; *Ideas Exchange*; *Links*; and *News and Events*. All resources are accessible from the home page.

For many years membership was strongly focussed on isolated people, for example those isolated by distance or circumstance (e.g. being a carer, disabled or ill). However, in 2009, membership was opened to all older persons and younger disabled persons. This step was taken in the belief that cyberspace lowers many disability barriers and therefore greater benefits will flow to isolated members through the development of more and varied resources which are provided by a larger volunteer base. The all volunteer service provision and Griffith hosting allows membership costs to be kept to A\$25 and this gives members access to more than 30 excellent courses and other resources at no additional cost.

I am the primary carer for my frail mother who at nearly 100 needs full time care now. Being able to access a service like this is one way to feel less isolated from the world outside. I am indeed much blessed.

Nowadays, living alone and physically limited, I was being stupefied by knitting, crochet, patchwork, computer puzzles and occasional bus trips. There is a limit.

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

In 2008 U3A Online was part of a partnership of four organisations which won the Australian Government \$15 million Broadband for Seniors tender. Funding is for up to 2000 Internet Kiosks throughout Australia to assist many of the 45% of Australians over the age of 65 who have never used the Internet, to come to grips with this powerful enabling medium.

Site licences

Individual U3As from any country may join U3A Online as member organisations. Member organisations may apply for *Site Licences* to any course. For A\$20/licence/course/year a licence permits member U3As to print as many copies of the course materials as they require for face-to-face teaching in their own U3A. In many cases the course notes run to more than 100 pages. Participants may keep their notes so the cost of copying provides them with a valuable, high quality reference. Current courses include:

- Ageing and Retirement
- Antarctica
- Astronomy
- Australian Flora
- Australian History 1
- Autobiography and Journaling
- Basic English Grammar
- Botany for Knowledge and Enjoyment
- China in Transition: From Mao to Now
- Continents on the Move
- Design in Your Life
- Food for Thought
- Genealogy Online
- Human Biology
- Introduction to Western Philosophy
- Left, Right or Centre: A very brief introduction to political ideologies
- Maintaining Independence
- My Life Story
- Myths and Legends
- Practical Psychology for Relationships
- Religions of the World
- Renaissance Italy
- Resources for the Future – Renewable and Non-Polluting
- Saving the Soil
- Storytelling with Pictures
- The Evolution of life on Planet Earth
- The History and Spread of the English Language
- The Night Sky
- The Northern Sky
- The Romans
- The Shaping of the Modern Mind
- Thoreau Emerson and the Conduct of Life
- Unleashing Your Creative Spirit
- Writing Family History
- Writing for Pleasure

Research

U3A Online has undertaken many research studies and the results have been published in books and academic journals. The 2008 Australian and NZ U3A research study was initiated and fully funded by U3A Online.