

History of U3A

The first University of the Third age was founded in Toulouse, France in 1972 to improve the quality of life for older people by bringing them into contact with academic programs run by the university. The idea spread rapidly in France, with many universities either absorbing older people into existing academic programs or setting up courses especially for the third ages. The success of the French experience has led to the rapid spread of U3A's to many other countries, particularly in continental Europe. An international association of U3A was established by 1975. It now has about 100 member organisations.

In July 1981, the U3A concept was introduced to Britain through a group based at Cambridge University. In contrast to the French practice, the British U3A's quickly evolved away from the model based on the pre-packaged courses provided by the universities. Instead they adopted the idea of self-help or mutual aid university – a kind of intellectual democracy in which there would be no distinction between teachers and the taught. There would be only members of U3A who would be encouraged to participate, either by teaching, learning or assisting with the planning and administration. This self-help approach reduces the need for dependence on outside resources.

The broad acceptance of the term “University” harks back to the original concept of a “community of scholars” in the medieval sense. In this environment, learning is an end in itself. Individuals learn what they like, at a pace they prefer. No qualifications are required to enter, neither are any qualifications awarded. In the later part of 1984 the first Australian U3A's were established throughout Australia. U3A's are voluntary self-help organisations. They tap a great reservoir of knowledge, skills and experience which is often undervalued and overlooked. All of the teaching, planning and administration of a U3A is carried out by its members. Thus there is no need to rely on the establishment (or the initiation) of some education institution before U3A's can be set up. This distinguishes U3A's from the traditional approaches to the educational provisions in our society, although in some instances, help has been given in their launching.

Each U3A is autonomous. Classes are planned jointly by the tutors and students in response to members interests. A tutor in one class is likely to become a student in another. The backgrounds of tutors vary greatly but all enjoy sharing with others interests which they pursued for many years. Sometimes a group may invite a visitor speaker or activity leader, but all such contributions, like those of the U3A members themselves are voluntary. Areas of study are negotiated to meet the needs of the learning groups. A course may be short or long, depending on the requirements of the subject and the interests of the group. Groups may be of any size according to needs. Teaching may be done by one individual or a team. Styles vary - highly participatory to conventional lecture techniques. U3A policy is to engage the help of as many members as possible to establish and keep operating the various areas of administration which are needed. Annual membership subscriptions are kept as low as possible. U3A Cairns was established in 1980 and is a self-help group that derives its strength from its member's capacities and sharing of their knowledge and experience.

AIMS & OBJECTIVES

The University of the Third Age is a learning community organisation organised by the people and for the people who can best be described as being in active retirement the “Third Age of their lives”. The objectives of the Association are:-

- (a) To provide programmers of learning activities which offer stimulation and development to people who are in the third stage of life.*
- (b) To create an organisation of learning where in co-operative investigation of a topic or area of mutual interest is a major focus of activities, experience expertise is freely shared.*
- (c) To operate this organisation in such a way that learning is pursued without any reference to awards and to create a climate free from decimation according to color, race, creed or sex.*
- (d) To realise the potentialities of mature adults and to increase community awareness of the fact that mature people retain the capacity to acquire, absorb and use new information and knowledge through their lives.*
- (e) To act with other community and educated organisations to provide the status and position of the mature citizen in the community.*
- (f) To exchange ideas and resources with other Universities of the Third Age, both in Australia and Overseas and to encourage the extension of simular organisations in other parts of Queensland and Australia.*