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**CHAPTER 12 - THE U3A MOVEMENT IN AUSTRALIA:
FROM STATEWIDE NETWORKING TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

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The ‘third age’ demographic in Australia

The third age, defined as the time in one’s life course for personal achievement and fulfilment beyond child-raising and retirement from the paid workforce (the ‘second age’) is a 20th century phenomenon, as life expectancy has extended well beyond retirement age for most people in all continents, including Australia. The third age is not a fixed chronological age, although it is often related to the opportunity to qualify for a government sponsored age pension or a superannuation pension. In Australia, that can mean any age between 55 (when superannuation pensions can be accessed) or 65 (when the age pension can be accessed, to be increased to 67 by 2023). By 2016, 15.7% of the Australian total population was aged 65 or older, and is projected to increase to 25% by 2050 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). By 2016, whilst life expectancy for Australian males had increased to 80.3 years, for Australian females it reached 84.4 years. As a result, the years of ‘retirement’ for most Australians can span up to 20 years and even beyond. These years can be enhanced through adoption of a lifelong learning ethos, for which the University of the Third Age (U3A) movement provides rich opportunities.

Origins and organisation of U3A in Australia

The first U3A to be established in Australia was in Melbourne, Victoria, in 1984, which adopted the ‘Cambridge’ model co-founded by Peter Laslett in Britain. The concept quickly spread to other States and Territories by 1989. Minichiello (1992) described the early days for the Australian U3A movement as follows:

Public meetings were held under the joint auspices of the Council for Adult Education and the Australian Council on the Ageing. The following guidelines established in the first few meetings have formed the blueprint for the organisational structure of U3A’s in Australia: U3As would need to develop along self-help lines, involving all participants in every aspect of the development of their own learning; [ii] co-operation rather than competition would be encouraged between campuses; [iii] campuses should initially develop under the auspices of some established body as government funding for the education of older people was limited; [iv] there were to be no upper or lower age limits. Non-working older people would be advantaged by classes held

during the day and a low yearly fee...and [v], the Australian Council on the Ageing (ACOTA) was to provide an umbrella for the movement in Victoria and Australia as U3As grew. The first public meeting was held on 26 July 1984 at the City Centre of the Council of Adult Education, Melbourne. Despite limited advertising, 60 to 70 older citizens attended. The second public meeting, held in Hawthorn in November, was preceded by extensive media coverage. One of the reasons for choosing the Melbourne suburb was that Hawthorn housed more than double the national average of elderly residents. A quarter of its population was over 65. (Minichiello, 1992: 412)

Australian U3As were founded as community-based, self-governed, not-for-profit groups, and aim to provide affordable learning opportunities for third agers using the skills, experience, knowledge and abilities of the members themselves. Hence, in line with the Laslett's (1991: 178) principle that "those who teach shall also learn - and those who learn shall also teach".

In 2018, there were over 300 U3A groups in Australia, with a combined total of about 100,000 members (it is noteworthy that, collectively speaking, this is equivalent to 10% of all students enrolled in official universities in Australia), and these numbers show no signs of abating. U3As are generally found in the capital cities, as well as in regional and rural areas. Most are located on the eastern coastal fringe in towns that tend to be favoured as retirement centres. They may be large or small. For example, Sydney U3A has 6,500 members, operating in seven metropolitan regional districts, and the Canberra U3A has 5,000 members. At the other end of the spectrum, there are small U3As of less than 50 members in small rural towns, where alternative opportunities for mental stimulation are rarely available. Since about 40% of Australians over the age of 65 live in regional and rural areas, it is not surprising that the majority of U3A members are found in such regions.

U3As in Australia are constituted as not-for-profit community associations, run by democratically elected committees. Administrative and ancillary duties such as webmasters, newsletter editors, course co-ordinators, as well as course leaders and tutors are undertaken by volunteers. Within that structure, U3As qualify as autonomous learning centres. As Beckett and Jones stated,

U3As in Australia are formed by groups of individuals in local communities, not organisations like many collaborative network organisations. They want a stimulating, participative recreational learning network for seniors, not a senior's social network that may provide learning. Both conventional and on-line learning modes are available. The focus is on long-term collaboration. Whilst each group operates as a separate entity, most choose to contribute to a regional virtual or physical office to cooperate in acquiring services as a group, sharing information on courses, interacting with governments and facilitating membership growth. (Beckett & Jones, 2011 : 195)

Most U3As offer a programme of weekly classes conducted in daylight hours and arranged on a school term or semester basis (many members have grand-parenting duties and so must be available for that during the school holidays). Some U3As operate every day of the week, others at lesser intervals as it suits the membership. U3As are responsible for their own expenses. They are funded primarily by annual subscriptions from members, on average about A\$50 per year, sometimes

supplemented by top-up contributions for courses which may require special equipment, such as art classes, or by local ‘fundraising’ activities, usually social in nature. The subscription enables the member to attend any class offered by that U3A. In this way, U3A is affordable for those on low incomes. Some U3As are able to obtain one-off community grants for specific purposes, such as the purchase of computer equipment or sporting equipment, or the production of promotional material. U3As in regional areas might also receive in-kind support from their local Member of Parliament, for example, to print newsletters. In essence, however, U3As function through the volunteer efforts of their members, which at the turn of the 21st Century Swindell and colleagues (2011) described it two decades ago as a 4 million Australian Dollar bonanza:

In total, 164 of 265 independent U3As in Australasia provided detailed counts of all activities carried out by their volunteers. In 2008, Australian U3As were supported by 871 000 volunteer hours and NZ U3As were supported by 69 000 volunteer hours. A notional value of \$20 per volunteer hour is rationalised. It values U3A volunteerism at \$21 million for Australia and \$1.9 million for NZ. (Swindell et al., 2011 : 196).

It is undoubtedly worth more since then. Most classes take place in rented accommodation, usually community centres and halls, libraries, or church buildings not utilised on weekdays. Some larger groups have been able to establish permanent office space, but smaller groups are usually administered from committee members’ own homes. Some larger U3As in regional towns have been able to work with government authorities to obtain permanent space in buildings no longer required for their original purpose, such as demountable school buildings or railway stations. There is no consistent response by local government to support U3A. Some local government authorities with age-friendly policies are supportive and offer rental discounts or other incentives, others are less helpful.

Curricula of U3As

The curriculum of each U3A group is determined by the needs and interests of its members, the resources available to it, and the availability of suitable tutors and small group leaders, all of whom are volunteer members of U3A. Curriculum also varies widely in content and delivery, from lecture series, to small group classes. Depending upon location, many U3A members provide lectures and courses for neighbouring U3As as well as their own. The advent of computer technology and the Internet has also enabled tutors and presenters to broaden their own expertise by researching new information to prepare courses on ‘powerpoint’ or via DVDs, as well as for U3As to access a wide range of downloadable courses. Within this framework, groups can offer a range of subjects, including Art Appreciation, Astronomy, Aboriginal Culture, Literature, History, Music Appreciation, Film Appreciation, Theatre and Drama, Languages, Philosophy, Economics, Law and Science. Skills offered include drawing and painting, crafts, cooking, music and dance, yoga, tai chi, creative writing, photography, quilting and embroidery, and computer technology.

There is considerable research that demonstrates that music is an important contributor to wellbeing and self-esteem in older people, as a listener or a participant, especially with others (Peachey et al., 2013; MacRitchie, 2016). In many U3As, retired music teachers and instrumentalists work hard to produce accomplished choirs

and orchestras who compete in competitions or present at local community concerts. Many artists and photographers enter their work in competitions at all levels, confident in the skills acquired in U3A.

Learning programmes on current affairs, philosophy and other discussion groups are also popular. Although the U3A is non-political and non-sectarian, members do not hold back on analysing and discussing major issues such as Animal Ethics, Euthanasia, Climate Change, the Future of the European Union, the Future of the United Nations, Trump's America, the Future of the Murray-Darling Basin, the potential for an Australian Republic, or Reconciliation with Indigenous Australians - U3A encourages expression of a diversity of viewpoints. Some U3As have also challenged local secondary schools to debate (not overtly contentious issues), and to relate to other generational viewpoints.

Light exercise, tai chi, yoga, bushwalking, and cycling are other key class programmes. Many U3As also organise educational fieldtrips for members, to venues such as art galleries and historical sites and museums. The range of interests of third agers, as well as their talents, enable them to take the roles of tutors or researchers, propelled by the ethos of 'learning for its own sake'. As one U3A member underlined, "It's the ideal school - run by the students, you only study what interests you, and there are no exams!" (Ron, as cited in *The Senior*, 2017 : 38)

Who are the members, and why do they join U3A?

U3A members come from different educational backgrounds and life experiences, although one notes that a relative majority of members hold a clear middle-class background. A survey undertaken by Hebestreit selected two U3As as a sample representative of the broader target population of all 64 U3As then in the State of Victoria, and found that, of 627 respondents:

With regard to the level of education, 29.7% of the respondents had completed high school at the highest level of education, 23.4% had completed an undergraduate university degree, 29.8% had completed business/technical or trade certificates or undergraduate diplomas, and 11.2% held postgraduate degrees. With regard to occupation prior to retirement, 45.3% indicated that they were in professional occupations, 25% indicated secretarial/office work, and 14% indicated management positions. (Hebestreit, 2008 : 552)

Many U3A members have acquired tertiary educational qualifications for their past professional employment - teachers, librarians and health service professionals in particular – but there are no qualifications needed to join U3A. The range of locations across Australia from State capital and regional cities, and regional and rural townships, where U3As have been established, provides a wide range of 'second age' employment. There are many members whose previous employment has been in hospitality, service industries, home management, farming, trades or sales, whose zest for lifelong learning ensures their participation as valuable and valued members. Scattered among their numbers are some former university academics, civil servants, and musicians, whose specialised experience and skills provide variety and expertise in the scope of courses and lectures available to their U3A.

It is also noteworthy that, although post-World War II Australia has become a culturally diverse nation - for example the 2016 census revealed that more than one-fifth (21%) of Australians spoke a language other than English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017) - U3A membership is primarily of British heritage. A singular exception is the Melbourne Chinese Christian U3A.

Hebestreit's survey (2008) found 36% of respondents were aged between 60-69 years, 44.3% were aged 70-79 years, and 14% were over 80 years. A survey of U3As in New South Wales undertaken in 2013 indicated that the ages of participants broadly range between 50 and 90, with 78% of members aged between 60 and 80 (de Hosson, 2013). Such patterns are similar in other States and Territories. In the wider population, at the lower end of the 60s age range, many are still in employment, while those who retire in their early sixties - or earlier - are achieving other ambitions such as travel and are then coming into U3A for personal fulfilment. Hence, the largest cohort of membership tends to be in the age range of 70-80. Many U3As adopt a minimum age for eligibility for membership, usually 50 so as to equate to populist imagination of what constitutes 'ageing' with retirement from the labour market. Others take a broader view, given that Laslett (1991) himself took the view that the possibility has to be contemplated that the Third Age can be lived contemporaneously with the Second Age. While most U3A members will be approaching or going beyond the statutory retirement age, some U3As accept members who may still be in part-time employment, or younger persons who have had early retirement forced upon them through redundancy, or who cannot work because of disability, but who also have a need for intellectual stimulation and social inclusion.

On average, about 70% of U3A members are women. To some extent this may be because women have a greater life expectancy than men, and are therefore more likely to be among the older age groups in U3A, while in Australian society men have traditionally been more likely to favour the company of other men and to belong to sporting and male dominated social clubs. Moreover, the growing popularity of Men's Sheds, with their emphasis on mutual support and wood and metal craft and construction activities, is possibly more attractive to some men than U3A (Ahl, Hedegaard, & Golding, 2017). In response, some U3As have established their own Men's Sheds although in the interests of equality of opportunity, women are allowed both membership and entry in the specific learning programmes.

Undoubtedly, there are many clubs and organisations which can provide entertainment for retired people, but the U3A stands out as a main provider of opportunities for activities which promote lifelong learning, and which benefit the cognitive skills and general health of its members, and support positive ageing (Bridgstock, 2018). Research over several decades indicates the importance of maintaining the physical and mental health of older people in the community, in order to foster self-reliance, independence and wellbeing and to stave off mental deterioration (Cornwell, 2009). As well as their role of fostering lifelong learning for keeping seniors mentally active in a relaxed and informal manner, U3As provide the opportunity to develop those features within a friendly and supportive, social environment, leading to personal, mental, social and physical enhancement. As Swindell and colleagues' survey of U3As in Australia and New Zealand concluded, the U3A movement

... quietly provided many, very-low-cost opportunities for members to take part in most or all of the successful ageing activities that are associated with continued independence in later life...Few organisations for retirees can point to a similar range of mentally, physically and socially stimulating courses, and the wide variety of volunteering opportunities provided by most U3As. (Swindell et al. 2011 : 200)

Hebestreit's survey found that the members surveyed regarded U3A as an important aspect of their lives leading to personal, mental, social and physical enhancement through the provision of lifelong education (Hebestreit 2008)

The same findings were echoed in de Hosson's (2013) survey in New South Wales which concluded that the principal reasons why people join U3A are wanting to learn new things, to participate in creative activities, and to keep their minds active. Many claimed to have feelings of boredom following their retirement from employment, and U3A was perceived to provide, in the words of one U3A member, "a reason to get up in the morning" (Paul, as cited in U3A Network NSW, n.d.). Equally important was the social interaction and the opportunity to develop friendships and companionship with people of a like mind. Another positive feature was affordability and 'value for money'.

Anecdotally, there are countless stories of new beginnings, especially though creative activities such as writing, painting, photography and music-making, which members may not have had time for during their working lives. Additionally, many U3A members achieve self-fulfilment by volunteering their time and talents to teach others, spending considerable time preparing lectures or classes for their U3A. An excellent example is a woman, a qualified exercise trainer, who contributed her professional experience to make a DVD of a light exercise 'balance and bones' strengthening programme which has enabled U3As and individual members to participate in a regular fitness series. This DVD has been especially valuable in rural and remote areas where access to such a professional program is not often available.

As many persons in later life tend to be widowed or single, the U3A offers friendship and social inclusion as well as mental stimulation (de Hosson 2013). Indeed, there is considerable evidence that social isolation can be detrimental to the physical and mental health of older people (Maginess, 2017), but the corollary is that positive social interaction enhance wellbeing in later life (Cornwell, 2009; Bridgstock, 2018). Moreover, non-formal continuing learning for older people can be liberating, by encouraging a sense of belonging to the wider world, and supporting them to maintain their independence, healthy dispositions, social interaction and intellectual functioning, in a convivial social environment to complement the learning environment.

U3A Online

U3A Online is the world's first 'virtual' U3A. It was established in 1998 - with Australian Government funding during the International Year of the Older Persons with the intention of providing educational courses for older people, who may be isolated due to location or disability, and unable to join a 'terrestrial' U3A (U3A Online, n.d.). It has currently over 1,000 members both within and outside Australia,

and its courses are also utilised by U3As which are located in more remote parts of the country where access to such traditional learning programmes is limited. Like any other U3A, all the administration and teaching within U3A Online is carried out by retired 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 not uncommon for volunteers to work closely together for many years, but never physically meet. All courses are written and taught by retired experts with the assistance of volunteer online editors...Each course runs for eight or nine weeks and is offered a few times a year, when the volunteer course leader is available. Participants interact with the leader and with others in the course by forum. (Swindell, Grimbeck, & Heffernan, 2011 : 128).

At any time, U3A Online may have up to 50 learning programmes available, with facilitators interacting with learners, as well as including learners engaged in independent study and utilising 'chat rooms' for those who wish to meet online with others. U3A Online also maintains a Directory of U3As in Australia and New Zealand.

Statewide networking

Australia is a federation comprising six States and two territories. Although U3As are autonomous bodies, in all States - except Tasmania - they have formed themselves into U3A Networks – the volunteer management committees of which are drawn from the U3A membership, and which maintain low key administrations. The Australian Capital Territory has a single U3A for over 5,000 members. U3As in Tasmania, the smallest State, maintain informal networking between themselves and with interstate U3As. The Networks are not intended as hierarchical bodies, but function to provide mutual support for their member U3As. For example, public liability insurance and education copyright licences have been taken out by some State Networks as blanket cover for all of their member U3As, as it is cheaper for U3A groups to contribute to them than to take out individual policies and licences.

The Networks also provide advice and support on promotion and publicity, governance, and relevant legislation. The Networks each run an annual or biennial conference where members can meet and share ideas and information, as well as provide an opportunity to hear keynote speakers on a range of important topics relevant to lifelong learning, positive ageing, and research. In New South Wales, the Network also offers a Resource Library, accessible to U3A members anywhere in Australia via the Network website. The Library is made up of courses prepared and donated by U3A members, as well as providing access and links to other suitable courses. Although Laslett (1991) advised against accepting government grants, some State governments have recognised the value of U3A in assisting older people to maintain mental and physical health as part of preventative health strategies. In Victoria, for example, significant funding has been made available for several years and is applied to maintaining a central office and expanding U3A throughout the State. In other States, occasional small grants for specific purposes have been

received, which have been applied to generic publicity for U3A including television advertising, and supporting the establishment of new and small U3As.

The Networks have formed U3A Alliance Australia (U3AAA) as the national face of the U3A movement in Australia. Due to the 'tyranny of distance', its deliberations are primarily conducted through electronic meetings, for the purposes of sharing information, and making submissions on national issues where relevant, although efforts are made to meet physically together at least once a year usually in conjunction with a State Network conference.

Community engagement

Over time, U3A has engaged with the wider community. U3As have developed relationships with local government councils, local newspapers, radio and television stations, and other older age group organisations in their localities. The State Networks are also building relationships with other State and national organisations with similar or complementary agendas.

Several U3A groups have taken some of their activities into retirement villages for the benefit of those residents in care units. It is a misconception to think that if a person is frail and perhaps even bedridden, that they lack interest in learning new things. The aim is to provide such people with the opportunity to participate in new learning, to enable them to engage in discussions, and to assist them to record their memoirs which can become a valuable history resource for family and for future researchers. U3A choirs often visit such units to provide musical entertainment where residents can join in community singalongs. There is considerable research which indicates that access to participation in music, dance and art, is of particular value for older people, especially if suffering from dementia, as these activities stimulate feelings of happiness and wellbeing, and open up new channels of communication (Cohen 2007; Beaumont 2013).

Although the U3A movement in Australia adopts the 'Cambridge' model, several U3As have also formed relationships with universities, which themselves are committed to policies of community engagement. These relationships can vary from the provision of access to university lectures on an audit basis (that is, not as an enrolled student), to collaboration in university research projects. Academics readily accept invitations to make presentations to U3A groups about aspects of their research in a variety of disciplines. U3A members are encouraged to participate in university research programmes as willing participants in projects looking at various facets of gerontological research - such as anxiety and changes to brain activity in older patients, pharmacological treatment of ageing, and ageing and neuroplasticity. Many do so through online surveys, interviews, and in some instances, as simulated 'patients' for medical students.

Challenges for the future

The primary challenge is: will the U3A movement in Australia continue to grow? There is no reason to think it will not. As older members have passed on, new members will certainly continue to join as U3A's availability and response to its

membership at grassroots level ensures its relevance. It's volunteer base provides self-esteem to its tutors and committee members, and affordability to its members. Moreover, the U3A movement in Australia has kept pace in the use of technology for both administrative efficiency and educational programme delivery. Most importantly, the fact that it offers intellectual stimulation and a range of activities within a social environment, makes it attractive to retired people who want more than just bingo or crosswords or carpet bowls. Research on the impact of intellectual activities on brain health in later life suggests that lifelong learning is an important factor in 'preventative health', and in minimising the risk of dementia (Mestheneos & Withnall, 2016). Many older people wish to engage in meaningful activities and opportunities for new experiences, so one can only expect U3As to continue provide those opportunities for continued learning, not as an economic imperative but to enhance positive ageing.

Of course, there are practical considerations to consider. Although accommodation for classes and meetings can be difficult to locate, more so as membership grows and as rentals of suitable premises continue to rise, there is a strong belief amongst the members that individual U3As will adapt to their circumstances. Many voluntary bodies, especially those whose membership is of older people, find it hard to get members to take on committee roles and responsibilities, particularly when long-serving officers decide to retire. If U3A is to be maintained, and the demand is obviously there, it is important that those joining U3As understand the underlying U3A principles of mutuality and reciprocity, and are prepared to contribute and to accept that all have a role to play, however small, in the effective operation of their group. Of equal, if not more, importance than its economic value, is the value of volunteering to the volunteer and community spirit. Volunteering has been found to build collective efficacy by bestowing a sense of altruism and citizenship; developing political and negotiation skills; and inspiring people to work together to solve problems and take action to improve community life (Volunteering Australia, 2015). Additionally, research literature on volunteering indicates that unpaid community service is highly associated with positive levels of physical and psychological wellbeing in later life (Milbourne, Saraswati & Buchanan, 2018).

Finally, while U3A is non-political, it is important to ensure that policy makers at all levels of Government (Commonwealth, State and local) are aware of the U3A movement. Each year, Commonwealth government budget discussions tend to reinforce the idea that older Australians are a burden on the economy in their reliance on pensions and the greater part of government spending on health. The U3A movement should work to change such a perception, and encourage policy makers to be cognitive of the value of U3A in maintaining mental and physical health for older people, and in promoting lifelong learning and preventative health in general. It is equally important to remind government of the fact that the highest contribution of volunteer hours in Australia by seniors - aged between 65 and 84 years of age - delivers an economic value of millions of dollars to the community (Volunteering Australia, 2015).

U3A is an evolving and dynamic organisation and has the momentum to prosper further in the future. As Betty Friedan (1994 : 4) poignantly put it, "ageing is not lost youth but a new stage for opportunity and strength".

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