

ORIGINS OF THE U3A MOVEMENT

The first U3As were founded in France and they have now spread right around the world

Most international movements have small beginnings; this one was started by a summer school, held at the University of Toulouse in 1972. Organised by Pierre Vellas, Professor of Political Economy, it offered, to retired persons, a program of lectures, concerts, guided tours and other cultural activities, making use of lecture halls and classrooms not in use at that time of year.

'Like all actors in human history, and the more so all pioneers and innovators, Vellas "did not know what he was doing". When after a few weeks the program came to an end, such were the determination and enthusiasm of its participants that, instead of preparing a repeat for the next summer, Vellas was forced to launch a program for the forthcoming academic year, to find rooms, lecturers and tutors. In no time similar undertakings mushroomed in France and abroad.'

Michel Philibut, in 'Mutual Aid Universities', edited by Eric Midwinter† (Croom Helm, 1984)

The 'Third Age' in the title refers to a phase of life. After the first age of dependent childhood comes the second age of independent adulthood in work and home-making, followed by the third age, the age of active retirement. For some, this is followed by a fourth age of dependence and senility; often not a happy age. It may be said that one of the major aims of Universities of the Third Age (U3As) is the lengthening of the third age and the

shortening (or even, perhaps, the elimination) of the fourth age.

The original U3As were initiated in France by traditional, established universities. Nevertheless, variations in structure soon occurred. In a list published in 1979, of 49 French U3As, 22 were described as agencies or services of universities but 16 existed as associations under a 'law of 1901' (similar, presumably, to our law governing incorporated associations). The remainder had a variety of associations with government and community organisations. This same pattern continued as the U3A movement spread rapidly to other European countries.

Despite this diversity, however, some conservative attitudes about relationships with universities persist. The International Association of U3As (commonly known as AIUTA), founded in 1975, has interesting membership rules. There are two main classes. Titular members are bodies which are recognisably U3As. Associate membership can be accorded to national or regional associations of U3As, to non-degree-awarding establishments, to research institutes or to further education bodies.

In 1995, the U3A Network-Victoria joined AIUTA as an Associate member, largely in order to maintain contact with this, the only international association of U3As.

THE 'CAMBRIDGE MODEL'

When the concept crossed the Channel, a significantly modified version appeared. Initiation by universities or other existing agencies was largely replaced, in the UK, by the notion of volunteer, self-help organisations. The main guidelines proposed in 'the Cambridge model', as it has become known, can be summarised thus:

* A U3A consists of a body of persons who undertake to learn and to help others learn (or in other ways to assist in the functioning of the organisation).

* Joining a U3A is a question of personal choice. No qualifications are

required for admission; no formal assessments are offered.

* The curriculum of a U3A is as wide as its human and financial resources permit; the preference of members is the only criterion of what is done.

The author of the first draft prospectus of the University of the Third Age in Cambridge was Dr Peter Laslett, of Trinity College. This document takes a firm moral stance. For example it includes, in its preamble, the statement that 'the committee firmly believes that it is both morally right and socially essential to provide opportunities of a broadly constructive nature to this large (third age) element in our society'. Its first Object is 'to educate British society at large in the facts of its present age constitution and of its permanent situation in respect of ageing' and the second is 'to assail the dogma of intellectual decline with age and make those in their later years aware of their intellectual, cultural and aesthetic potentialities'; this tone persists throughout the document.

It is the notion of coming together to learn from one another which encourages retention of the word 'University' in the title; an echo, one hopes, of the original mediaeval concept of a community of scholars. The Cambridge prospectus affirms the status of its new foundation as 'a university in the original sense, that is a co-operative of persons devoted to a particular educational activity. The Victorian and more recent idea of a university as an exclusively academic and examination-oriented institution will be avoided.'

It must be admitted that the title can sometimes be a little counter-productive. Many people find the idea of joining a 'university' for the first time, in their retirement, a bit daunting. However the description 'Universities of the Third Age' has stuck and is now internationally recognised by UNESCO and other agencies; and, in any case, no-one has come up with a better generic title for this movement.

ORIGINS IN VICTORIA; GROWTH OF THE NETWORK

The Australian initiative came from a group of four people, working professionally in either adult education or organisations concerned with the welfare of the aged, who met and discovered that they had each developed an interest in the U3A concept and had been following its growth, both through international literature and occasional contacts at overseas conferences. They decided to see if the idea would successfully transplant to the Australian environment. A public meeting, arranged with quite modest publicity, was held in July, 1984. That was sufficiently encouraging for the first Australian U3A to be established, with support from the Council of Adult Education, which found space for this 'City of Melbourne U3A' in its Flinders Street headquarters.

The second public meeting, in November of the same year at Hawthorn, attracted an overflow audience of about 250; Hawthorn U3A was duly launched. The third, at Monash University in February 1985, was even larger. A 350-seat lecture theatre was packed and, with the support of the Vice-Chancellor, the University's Centre for Continuing Education helped the U3A at Monash to get under way.

Groups at Ringwood and Frankston soon followed in 1985 and before long an informal 'Network' organisation was established through the agency of the Australian Council on the Ageing (ACOTA). ACOTA's crucial role in support of this movement should be acknowledged. Not only did it provide a venue for Network meetings but also; and even more import-

antly; it provided some of the time of its staff to service this fledgling organisation, to provide a central enquiry service and to spread the 'U3A gospel' interstate.

As the number of U3As in this Network grew, it became apparent that ACOTA could not continue to provide the resources to operate it. A new incorporated association, The U3A Network-Victoria Inc. was established in 1988. Its members are U3A associations in the State, rather than individuals. More details concerning this organisation are given elsewhere in the Reference file (Section 2).

The great majority of the Victorian U3As are independent incorporated associations. Members pay an annual subscription; mostly in the range of \$25 to \$35; and this entitles them to attend as many classes as they wish, subject to limitations on class sizes. All of the organisational work is done by voluntary committees and no-one is paid to teach or to convene any of the activities. (There are some very rare exceptions in which the members of a specialist activity group contribute, between them, the costs of a professional tutor.)

The whole structure flows from a recognition that one of the greatest repositories of accumulated skills and experience in our community is among active, retired people. They have, among themselves, all the knowledge and abilities they need to organise and run anything; and when they set out to do that for themselves they do it superbly well. While there is little or no need for intervention by governments or other institutions in the day-to-day operations of U3As, it must be acknowledged that the ma-

jority of these groups rely on some assistance from auspicing bodies.

DEVELOPMENTS IN OTHER STATES

The development of the movement in other States has been rapid, but not as intensive as in Victoria. There is a well-established group of U3As in the Southeast corner of Queensland and others on the coast up as far as Cairns. In NSW, there is a flourishing and large U3A in Sydney with a regional structure whereby separate programs are organised in different parts of the city. Others exist in the west of Sydney and in several country towns, some with active support from state education or health agencies. A NSW State Council of U3As has been established and now has the majority of the U3As in country NSW as members.

The situation in Western Australia is similar, but on a smaller scale. A U3A with a regional structure covering the suburbs of Perth was established through leadership provided by the Extension service of the University of WA, which provides a central back-up service. A few U3As operate in country areas outside Perth. There is good communication between the U3As in South Australia, mostly centred around Adelaide, so that a form of de facto state organisation also exists there.

Overall, then, there are structures in place which may well favour the establishment of some kind of national organisation although the need for one is, at this stage, arguable rather than obvious.