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- [✉ info@nsw.u3anet.org.au](mailto:info@nsw.u3anet.org.au) (mailto:info@nsw.u3anet.org.au)
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The U3A Movement

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What ARE Universities of the Third Age?

Universities of the Third Age, or U3As as they are more often called are voluntary, non-profit organisations which aim to offer older people low-cost educational opportunities which operate in a pleasant, supportive social setting. There are no formal entry requirements, no examinations and no “awards”. U3As are basically self-help groups built on the premise that collectively older people have the skills and knowledge to provide learning opportunities (education) for themselves. After all, “experts” of all kinds in all fields eventually retire! In fact the word “university” in the title is used in its earliest sense – a community of scholars who get together to help each other in a learning/social experience. Most of the groups in Australia are community based, but there are several, mainly in the capital cities, which do have an affiliation with and receive support from their local University. The principles of self-help and mutual support are the cornerstone of the U3A movement.

How and when did the U3A movement begin?

U3A (University of the Third Age) is a world-wide organisation. It began in France in 1968, when legislation was passed that required universities to provide more community education. In 1973 a highly-rated gerontology course was provided by Toulouse University for local retired people, a course which was extremely successful and which led to the formation of what was to be the first U3A. This organisation was open to anyone over retirement age; no qualifications or examinations were required and fees were kept to a minimum.

The idea spread rapidly throughout France and then to Belgium, Switzerland, Poland, Italy, Spain and across the Atlantic to Quebec and California. When U3A surfaced in Great Britain (in Cambridge), however, the "model" was to undergo a significant change. Whereas in the French model there were strong ties to the universities, which decided upon, structured and presented most of the courses, in the British model these university ties were to disappear. In the new system there was to be no distinction between the teacher and the taught – members would, as far as possible, be teachers as well as learners. This new self-help approach is based on the knowledge that "experts" of every kind in every field retire, so there should be no need to depend on paid tutors of either the second or third ages!

The late Dr. Peter Laslett (Cambridge University) was responsible for adapting the founding French university sponsored U3A into a community based model which has become known as the "Cambridge Model" of U3A which is common to U3As in Australia. He was also responsible for defining the four "ages of man" in his book *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age*. Retirement offered an opportunity to catch up with a lot of activities there had not been time for in the first two stages of life.

This British model of U3A was the one introduced into Australia (Melbourne) in 1984. The first U3A in NSW was established in the Shoalhaven area. The U3A movement has since spread rapidly throughout Australia. There well over 200 U3A groups nation-wide and national membership is heading towards 100,000. The U3A movement has been identified through academic research as being the fastest-growing adult education movement in Australia.

World-wide U3A

U3A is a **world wide organisation** with groups in many countries. There are more than 3000 groups spread over all continents and there is an **International Association, AIUTA** which holds an International Conference every three years. It is possible to attend this as an observer and you should be able to obtain details from the Network's Secretary if you are thinking of attending. There are different names for U3A in different countries. This site worldu3a.org (<https://worldu3a.org/>) is a useful place to gauge the scale and spread of U3A.

The **U3A movement in Australia** per head of population, has *the greatest number of U3A groups in the world*, and continues to expand. Four states have a state body, viz. The Victorian Network, the U3A Queensland Network, the South Australian U3A Alliance, and our own U3A Network NSW. U3A Canberra functions as both a local U3A and a state body. All U3A are autonomous and the state bodies act only as advisory and administrative units. There is also the nationally-based **U3A Online**, a 'virtual' U3A. The State bodies, together with U3A ACT, U3AOnline, and the support of U3A UWA (Western Australia) are all part of the national group called the **U3A Australia Alliance** (U3AAA).

How do U3As operate?

Each U3A is an autonomous association whose members are, in the main, retired or at least semi-retired. *The recommended age-requirement for membership is 50 years plus.*

Each group is run by a **Management Committee** democratically elected from among members. Administration and office functions are performed by members on a voluntary basis.

Course leaders/tutors are as far as possible drawn from the membership, although community (non-U3A) volunteers may sometimes be willing to conduct short courses or a one-off presentation. In the spirit of SHARING, there is no distinction between teacher and taught; the leader of one course may well be a student in another. Course leaders (member or non-member) do not receive payment for their services, but are on occasion reimbursed for out of pocket expenses such as travel, photocopying etc.

What do U3As offer?

Most U3As offer a program of weekly classes conducted in daylight hours and arranged on a term or semester basis. (It has been found that as many members have grand-parenting responsibilities, it is sometimes wise to avoid scheduling activities during school holidays!) A wide range of subjects are offered, depending on the interests of members and the availability of suitable group-leaders/tutors.