

Active Ageing

From Wisdom to Lifelong Learning

Edited by
Guido Amoretti, Diana Spulber and Nicoletta Varani



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The Travails of the University of the Third Age Movement: a Critical Commentary

Marvin Formosa

15.1

Introduction

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a proliferation of educational institutions catering exclusively to the learning needs and interests of older adults. The University of the Third Age (U3A), founded in 1973, has become one of the most successful institutions engaged in late-life learning. U3As can be loosely defined as socio-cultural centres where older persons acquire new knowledge of significant issues, or validate the knowledge which they already possess, in an agreeable milieu and in accordance with easy and acceptable methods (Midwinter, 1984). Its target audience are people in the third age of the life course – that is, a life phase «in which there is no longer employment and child-raising to commandeer time, and before morbidity enters to limit activity and mortality brings everything to a close» (Weiss, Bass, 2002, p. 3).

15.2

French Origins (1972-1980)

Following legislation passed by the French government in 1968 which made universities responsible for the provision of lifelong education, the summer of 1972 saw Pierre Vellas coordinating at the University of Toulouse a summer programme of lectures, guided tours, and other cultured activities, for retired persons (Radcliffe, 1984). Surprisingly, when the programme came to end the enthusiasm and determination of the participants showed no signs of abating, so that Vellas was “forced” to launch a new series of lectures for retirees for the forthcoming academic year. Vellas (1997) formulated four key objectives for this new educational enterprise

– namely, 1. raising the quality of life of older people, 2. realising a permanent educational programme for older people in close relational contact with other younger age groups, 3. co-ordinating gerontological research programmes, and last but not least, 4. realising initial and permanent education programmes in gerontology. The first U3A was open to anyone who had reached statutory retirement age in France at that time, and who was willing to fill in a simple enrolment form and pay a nominal fee.

Learning activities were scheduled for daylight hours, five days a week, for eight or nine months of the year. After the programme was marketed on a limited basis, 100 older persons attended the opening session for the 1972-1973 academic year (Philibert, 1984).

Teachers were highly enthusiastic about the motivation and sheer human warmth displayed by older students and marvelled at the way they learnt with new techniques such as audio-visual language laboratories. The first U3A curriculum, at Toulouse, focused on a range of gerontological subjects, although in subsequent years subject content became mainly in the humanities and arts (Vellas, 1997). The Union French University of the Third Age was founded in 1980 and quickly sought to clarify the meaning of the word “university” in the title, and therefore, which kinds of U3As were eligible to become members (Radcliffe, 1984). The dominant view was that U3As should strive to maintain high academic standards by holding direct links with recognised and established universities, and to uphold the credibility of the label “university” by increasing the proportion of university academic staff (*ibid.*). As a result, although lectures were combined with debates, field trips, and recreational and physical opportunities, the French academic maxim of “teachers lecture, students listen” was constantly upheld (Percy, 1993, p. 28). Indeed, all U3As during the 1970s operated through a more or less a strict “top-bottom” approach, where the choice of subjects and setting of course curricula was the responsibility of university academics, and with learners expected to show deference to the intellectual eminence of university professors.

15.3

The British Renaissance (1981-1990)

As the U3A phenomenon gained increasing international recognition, it did not escape the attention of British educators and gerontologists. The first U3A in Britain was established in Cambridge, in July 1981, and quick-

ly replicated in other cities and towns (Midwinter, 2004). The British version underwent a substantial change compared to the original French model, with Midwinter (1984, p. 3) going as far as to describe the use of the title “U3A” as «an unashamed burglary of the continental usage». Rather than being incorporated within social science, education, or theology faculties within traditional universities, British U3As embraced a self-help approach based upon the principle of reciprocity, of mutual giving and taking. Self-help groups include people coming together to assist each other with common problems, providing mutual support and an exchange of information, whilst being typified by minimal social distance between them (Brownlie, 2005). The self-help model holds immense potential for late-life education since experts of all kinds retire with the skills and interest to successfully increase both the number and range of resources available. The key objectives stipulated for British U3As, according to one co-founder, included

to educate British society at large in the facts of its present age constitution and of its permanent situation in respect of ageing [...] to create an institution for those purposes where there is no distinction between those who teach and those who learn, where as much as possible of the activity is voluntary, freely offered by members of the University [...] to undertake research on the process of ageing in society, and especially on the position of the elderly in Britain (Laslett, 1989, pp. 177-8).

The hallmarks of British U3As include their sturdy independence and anti-authoritarian stance (Huang, 2006). Aspiring to instigate a democratic movement that enriches the lives of older adults through the development of a range of learning, action, and reflection opportunities, British U3As declined to form part of «the official, state-founded, established structure with its professional teachers and administrators» (*ibid.*, p. 74).

15.4

Contemporary Developments (1991-2017)

The U3A movement has gone a long way since its inception. In 2008, the International Association of Universities of the Third Age (IAUTA) included memberships from U3As situated in 23 different countries, although U3As are present in more than 60 countries (Swindell, 2012). IAUTA organises a biennial international congress and encourages collaborative projects be-

tween U3As situated in different countries. Another productive organisation is WorldU3A. Founded in 1997, it encourages international contacts between U3As through internet activity. One of its invaluable projects consists of the ongoing “technological support” email list moderated by U3A members which provide rapid answers to technology-based problems (*ibid.*).

Although many centres still follow either the French or British traditions, there are at present four other models: the “culturally-hybrid”, “French-speaking North American”, “South American”, and “Chinese” types (Levesque, 2006). Culturally-hybrid U3As include both Francophone and British elements. For instance, U3As in Finland are affiliated with a university programme, use university resources, but then rely heavily on “local learning groups” of older people to define the curricula so that they are characterised by an open-door policy and are essentially co-operative unions (Yenerall, 2003). The U3A in Malta also combines Francophone and Anglophone characteristics by having lectures by university-based professors as well as interest-group sessions under the guidance of members (Formosa, 2012). French-speaking U3As in Canada form part of a traditional university, but then are seriously intent on blurring the distinction between higher education and third-age learning. For instance, the U3A in Montreal established a Bachelor of Arts degree programme to meet the complex needs and interests of the third-age population whereby admission requirements included «appropriate former studies or self-taught knowledge» and «sufficient knowledge of both French and English» (Lemieux, 1995, p. 339). South American U3As are also close to the Francophone model as they are characterised by an institutional link to a host University where the link is regarded as self-evident as much from the University’s point of view as from that of the members. However, South American U3As are also typified by a strong concern for the most deprived and vulnerable sectors of the older population (Levesque, 2006) – which is surely very atypical to the Francophone model whose value orientations tend to be apolitical, and at times, even elitist (Formosa, 2007). Finally, Chinese U3As make use of a number of older revered teachers who are paid a stipend, and older and younger unpaid volunteers, to teach a curriculum which covers compulsory subjects such as health and exercise, as well as various academic and leisure courses ranging from languages to philosophy to traditional crafts (Swindell, 2011). U3As in China adopt a holistic perspective towards learning, and hence, are much concerned with the maintenance and development of citizenship, cultural consolidation, philosophical reflection and bodily harmony.

Contributions of U₃As

Various studies applaud U₃As for improving the quality of life of members. Admittedly, at present one locates no rigorous research programme investigating the relationship between U₃A membership on one hand, and improvement in physical and cognitive well-being on the other. It is surely not the intention here to argue in favour of some strong causal relationship between learning and an improvement in physical/cognitive well-being in later life since, as Withnall (2010) argues, most research in this field has tended to proceed on the basis of a range of clinically unproven assumptions. It remains, however, that there are many valid and reliable studies showing how continued mental stimulation in later life aids learners to, at least, maintain their physical and cognitive health status (Cohen, 2006; National Seniors Australia, 2010). Wrosch and Schulz's (2008) findings that older adults who were proactive and persistent in countering health problems experienced greater physical and mental health benefits augurs well, since most U₃As offer various courses on health promotion and illness prevention. In this respect, the fact that Australian elders perceive their U₃A membership to have improved their health status is surely encouraging:

If you're active, and you're active in your mind then, yes, it does make a difference to your health [...] but if you were sitting down doing nothing, well your system's not working – the brain's not working. And if the brain starts to get slack or just doing nothing it transmits to the rest of the body and the rest of the body becomes slack (Liverpool U₃A member [Australia], cited in Williamson, 1997, p. 180).

Sonata and colleagues' (2011) study in Brazil also underlined the role of U₃As in augmenting elders' physical health. The Piracicaba U₃A was found to function to preserve members' "fat-free mass" levels by decreasing and improving their levels of inactivity and physical exercise respectively, factors which are crucial to, at least, maintaining, well-being in later life.

U₃As also hold a potential to lead learners towards improved levels of psychological capital. Studies have uncovered an association between participation in U₃As and improved levels of self-assurance, self-satisfaction, self-esteem and sense of coherence on one hand, and a decline of depressive and anxiety symptoms on the other (Formosa, 2000; Zielińska-Więczkowska *et al.*, 2011, 2012). This implies that engagement at a U₃A centre

can have therapeutic functions towards the adjustment of older adults with their ageing and retirement transitions. Indeed, a study on the relationship between psychological well-being (autonomy, personal growth, control, positive relationships with others, purpose, personal acceptance, and generativity) and participation in the São Paulo U3A in Brazil concluded that «the students [sic] who had been longer on the programme run by the institute studied, exhibited higher levels of subjective and psychological well-being [... where the satisfaction and benefits gained [from learning] extend into other areas of life» (Ordonez *et al.*, 2011, p. 224). Turning our attention again to the Irish context, Whitaker's (2002, quoted in Bunyan, Jordan, 2005) research concludes that U3A participation helps to develop confidence as learners realise the value of the knowledge that they share with others. She notes that by participating in U3As members get their life experiences recognised and appreciated, and learn how to get beyond the critical voice that tells us we "aren't good enough" or "that we have nothing to say". Elsewhere, Irish participants also disclosed how U3A helped them to improve their confidence in their abilities in information and communication technology (Bunyan, Jordan, 2005).

It is noteworthy that the majority of U3As only exist because of time-consuming work on behalf of volunteers. In the UK, the balance of volunteers to staff is overwhelming, with over 250,000 members and only 14 staff at the national office, half of them part-time (Cox, 2011). In Italy, 57 per cent of tutors are volunteers (Principi, Lamura, 2009). The economic value of U3As has been efficiently gauged by Swindell who, instead of modestly letting the record of voluntarism speak for itself, actually calculated an actual monetary figure to the work that third-age volunteers donate to many sectors of the Australian and New Zealander U3As. His latest calculations are of \$21 million and \$1.9 million for Australian and New Zealand U3As respectively (Swindell *et al.*, 2010). Whilst 22 per cent of volunteering time was generally spent on administrative issues, the remainder consisted of actual tutoring hours. Swindell's estimates provide proof to the claim that the U3A phenomenon enables the government to spend less on welfare and civic programmes targeting the improvement of the quality of life in later years, as well as challenging the orthodox beliefs of ageing as a period of loss and decline, and that older adults are simply recipients of welfare and consumers of public funds. The U3A phenomenon also problematises Putnam's (2000) argument that civic participation has declined in the latter part of the 20th century, whilst backing Freedman's (1999, p. 19) claim that older adults have become the «new trustees of civ-

ic life». Undoubtedly, U₃As are a strong affiliate in the “civic enterprise” movement. Although U₃As are not political enterprises, and thus do not promote any kind of political activism, they do encourage older persons to become involved in helping others in the community. U₃As enrich societies with opportunities for greater fulfilment and purpose in later years, and therefore, enable older adults to reach improved levels of active, successful and productive ageing. Indeed, the U₃A approach provides a sustainable policy model for how future governments might capitalise on the productive resources of the increasing numbers of expert retirees.

15.6

Issues and Predicaments

Despite the aforementioned contributions of U₃As to society in general and older persons in particular, what appears to be a forthright exercise in facilitating learning opportunities for older adults is also fraught with widespread misconceptions and biases. In some ways, and especially from a logistical perspective, U₃As have become victims of their own success. The triumph of U₃As in attracting more learners is giving forth to problems in locating suitable venues large enough to accommodate the membership body, and enough volunteers to administer and run courses of study and interest-groups. This is especially the case for U₃As following the self-help model who tend not to possess sufficient funds to employ administrative staff and who are reluctant to implement or increase enrolment fees as this is perceived to undermine the self-help character of the organisation. Indeed, some U₃As had no other option than to cap memberships in order to ensure that members could be accommodated in the already over-stretched facilities of centres, as well as operate waiting lists (Picton, Lidgard, 1997). Laslett’s (1989, p. 178) objective for U₃As to «undertake research on the process of ageing in society» has also emerged as a contentious issue. Laslett thought that U₃A members are in an ideal situation to undertake research that would counter not only the predominance of ageist literature on the ageing process but would also function «to assail the dogma of intellectual decline with age» (*ibid.*). Although initially one witnessed some level of participation on behalf of U₃As in a number of research projects, it must be admitted that most U₃As neither participate in nor produce research. Most U₃A managers are occupied with the demands of day-to-day organisation, and research is not amongst the members’ high

priorities. As Katz (2009, p. 156) claimed, members «are seeking an education apart from formal accreditation institutions, and Laslett's mandate to create an alternative, Third Age research base [appears] to be daunting».

Although U3As following the Francophone model are more able to access funds, retain nominal enrolment fees (as they make free use of university resources), and implement easily any course that strikes the fancy of members due to the large pool of teaching personnel at the university/college, they are not devoid of limitations. Lectures generally take place on university campuses which tend to be far away from village and city centres, and hence, inaccessible for many older adults (Picton, Lidgard, 1997). They are also characterised by a lack of agency over the ethos and direction of the U3A, as usually the academic body has the last say on every matter and total decision-making power on the most fundamental aspects (Formosa, 2000). For instance, the drive behind the founding of the U3A in Malta arose neither from responses to community needs nor from requests by older persons themselves, but from the aspirations of academics working in the field of ageing (*ibid.*). As a result, it is governed by a "mission statement" that was written and developed exclusively by university academics without any consultation with age-interest groups or older persons.

Irrespective of the type of organisational model being followed, research has found U3As to incorporate a number of crucial biases. A consistent criticism levelled at U3As is that of elitism as there is a compounding class divide affecting chances to seek membership (Radcliffe, 1984; Swindell, 1993; Picton, Lidgard, 1997; Formosa, 2000, 2007; Alfageme, 2007). Although U3As offer no hindrances or obstacles to membership, membership bodies tend to be exceedingly middle-class. Educators have long commented how «threatened... by elitism and pastime activism, U3As might indulge in narcissism and escapism and miss altogether the highest vocation they should respond to» (Philibert, 1984, p. 57), and how U3As «pandered to the cultural pretentious of an aged bourgeoisie who had already learned to play the system» (Morris, 1984, p. 136). This occurs because older adults who have experienced post-secondary education, and have advanced qualifications and skills, are already convinced of the joy of learning so that their motivation to enrol in U3As is very strong. To middle-class elders, joining means going back to an arena in which they feel confident and self-assured of its outcome and development. On the other hand, working-class elders are apprehensive to join an organisation with such a "heavy" class baggage in its title. Moreover, the liberal-arts curriculum promoted by most U3As is perceived as alien by working-class elders,

who tend to experience “at-risk-poverty” lifestyles and are more interested in practical knowledge related to lifelong work practices. Formosa (2000) argues that U3A may actually be serving as a strategy for middle-class elders to offset the class-levelling experience resulting from retirement. In the way that books and paintings are used to impress friends and other social viewers, membership is employed as a strategy of class “distinction”.

U3As have also been criticised for including gender biases that worked against the interests of both men and women. On one hand, all surveys uncover a positive women-to-men ratio: 3:1 in the UK and Malta (Midwinter, 1996; National Statistics Office, 2009), 4:1 in Australia (Hebestreit, 2008), and 2.5:1 in Spain (Alfageme, 2007), to mention some. It may seem that this gender imbalance is because women hold higher life expectancies and leave employment at an earlier age than men. While such explanations do make sense, they fail to explain why older women choose to enrol in U3As and overlook that married women retirees remain accountable for most domestic responsibilities. At the same time, the high participation rates of women do not necessarily imply that U3As are fulfilling some beneficial roles towards them. The reality, in fact, is otherwise, as studies point out how U3As may serve to anchor female members in gender expectations about women’s traditional roles. For instance, women tend to be less visible in mixed classes at U3As where male learners are more likely to dominate any discussion even when in the minority (Bunyan, Jordan, 2005). Formosa (2005) also noted how the Maltese U3A was characterised by a “masculinist” discourse where women are silenced and made passive through their invisibility, an outnumbering of male over female tutors, and a perception of older learners as a homogeneous population which contributed towards a “male stream” learning environment. However, this is not the same as saying that men enjoy preferential treatments in U3As. The low percentage of men signals strongly that for a number of reasons the organisation is not attractive to them. First, U3As are promoted through avenues – such as during health programmes on the broadcasting media or through leaflets at health centres – where most of the clients are women. Second, U3As are exceedingly “feminised”. Not only is the membership mostly female, but so are management committees (Williamson, 2000). As Scott and Wenger (1995, p. 162) stated, older men tend not to want to become involved with old people’s organisations they perceive to be dominated by women. Third, U3A courses tend to reflect the interests of the female membership. Health promotion courses, despite being open to all, are generally delivered by female tutors with a bias towards women-related health issues

such as weight-loss and osteoporosis (Formosa, 2005). U3As, hence, continue to enforce men to relate to a culture that encourages them to cling to traditional roles and patterns of behaviour where it is believed that that engaging in learning is for women rather than for men.

Other predicaments concerning the U3A include the movement's tendency to lack ethnic minorities and fourth agers in its membership body. For instance, both Swindell (1999) and Findsen (2005) point out that given the multi-cultural environment of Australia and New Zealand, one would reasonably expect to see at least some Asian faces plus those of Maori and Pasifika people. This is, however, not the case and memberships of Australasian U3As are heavily represented by members from the Anglo-Saxon community. Findsen concludes that the exclusion of minority groups may not be deliberate, but as the projected ethos of U3As mirrors the values of the dominant groups in society, ethnic minorities feel that they do not have the necessary "cultural capital" to participate in such learning ventures. At the same time, U3A membership bodies generally do not include older persons experiencing physical and cognitive difficulties. This is surprising considering that there are many old-old persons (aged *circa* 75 plus) facing mobility and mental challenges. Moreover, even at a relatively young age, many a times prior to statutory retirement, various older adults experience complications from strokes, diabetes, and neurological diseases so that their functional mobility and intellectual resources become seriously limited. Indeed, a significant percentage of older adults experience significant mobility and mental problems to the extent of becoming housebound or having to enter residential and nursing care homes. Unfortunately, to-date one locates no distinct efforts by the U3A movement to encompass the learning needs and interests of frail older adults in its aims and objectives.

15.7

Renewing U3As: Future Roles, Opportunities and Directions

As the U3A movement embarks on its fifth decade, it would be a mistake for programme managers to rest on its laurels, as doing so the movement would risk meeting the same fate as the sewing circles of our grandparents' time. The key challenge faced by U3As is to remain in tune and relevant to the life-world of present and incoming older cohorts. The U3A concept emerged in the early 1970s when the life course was divided in three clear and distinct stages: childhood as a time for education, adulthood as a time

to raise a family and work, and old age as a brief period characterised by withdrawal from work until frail health and eventually death. During this period the identity of older people existed within the context of the welfare state that embedded them in a culture of dependence through a compulsory pensioner status and near-compulsory entry to residential/nursing care (Townsend, 2007). With the coming of late modernity, the social fabric became more fluid in character, so that later life disengaged itself from traditional concepts of retirement to become increasingly complex, differentiated and experienced in a myriad of ways (Blaikie, 1999). Nowadays, identities in later life take on a “reflexive organised endeavour”, operating on the basis of choice and flexibility, and finding their full expression in material consumption (Gilleard, Higgs, 2000). However, it seems that U3As remain locked in more traditional perceptions of late adulthood and somewhat oblivious to such transformations. James (2008) argues that centres have generally failed to keep pace with what older adults actually do in their lives, what tickles their fancy, and what motivates them to age actively, successfully and productively. She highlights how the U3A movement tends to be characterised by what Riley and Riley (1994) term as “structural lag” – namely, a failing on behalf of structural arrangements to meet or be relevant to the needs of a large proportion of its clientele. In Riley and Riley’s words, “structural lag” refers to

the imbalance – or the mismatch – between the strengths and capacities of the mounting numbers of long-lived people and the lack of role opportunities in society to utilise and reward these strengths. This is the problem we call structural lag, because the age structure of social role opportunities has not kept pace with rapid changes in the ways people grow old (*ibid.*, p. 15).

Similarly, Formosa (2012) points out that U3As generally overlook how incoming older cohorts are characterised by diverse generational dispositions when compared to those older adults that Vellas and Laslett had in mind when drafting the movement’s principles and objectives. Undoubtedly, the past two decades have brought cultural changes that have altered the norms and values of contemporary older cohorts. Most salient among these changes include an improvement in their wealth, health, and educational status, smaller family circles due to more older women having participated in labour markets, and an increasing readiness to combine part-time employment with leisure pursuits in retirement. The coupling of such transformations to other processes, most notably secularisation and individualisation, has been instru-

mental in urging third agers to create their own life biographies rather than remain shackled to traditional expectations towards daily living in “old age”. In such circumstances, it is surely time for U₃As to re-appraise their functions and purposes and demonstrate that the movement remains a forward-thinking group which welcomes new ideas and new ways of practice. It would be extremely unfortunate if upcoming and present third agers feel the need to start new organisations simply because of their perception that U₃As are no longer relevant to their lives. This section forwards three recommendations for the U₃A movement to remain more in tune with the needs and interests of contemporary older adults.

Overcoming French-British polarities Contrary to what is generally assumed, studying for pleasure and towards a qualification are not necessarily incompatible, but may even be complimentary. After all, one frequently hears of third agers being emboldened by their U₃A experience as to start a university course, and on the other hand, of older undergraduates taking a keen interest or even becoming members in their local U₃A. Rather than entrenching the U₃A experience in an absolutist vision – advocating either strict autonomy or complete integration with traditional universities – U₃As have much to gain from seeking partnerships with tertiary educational sectors working on similar ethos. Whilst partnerships in older adult learning do not have to be formally constituted and grand affairs, the benefits of collaborative approaches include «better information is available to help plan for learning, to deliver it in the best way, to promote engagement with it and to provide progression routes from it» (Gladdish, 2010, p. 26). One successful partnership between a traditional university and a U₃A is found between the University of South Australia and the Whyalla U₃A (Ellis, 2009; Ellis, Leahy, 2009). The central location and resources of the university provided rent-free premises which allowed their fees to be kept much lower than in other Australian U₃As, and easy access for invited speakers and members. U₃A members also enjoyed interacting with younger students and the help and encouragement that university staff extended to them. On the other hand, the benefits that the campus received from the U₃A included the location of a pool of “clients” for nursing and social work students, volunteer and administrative help on open days, whilst adding to the cultural and generational diversity present on campus. Another promising partnership constitutes the memorandum of understanding between Third Age Trust and The Open University in Britain which recognises the complementary missions of both organisations, and which may lead to better opportunities for older learners to improved access of library

and online facilities, participation in university courses and modules, and registering as students with reduced fees and different entrance qualifications.

Quality of learning Research studies and rationales focusing on the U3A movement affirm in an equivocal manner that learning holds positive benefits for its members. However, the precise contribution of learning in U3As to an empowerment agenda remains ambiguous. One must ask whether learners at U3A centres are too docile, too passive, as though listening alone were enough. This is certainly the case for U3As following the French model whose members are lectured by professors employed by the traditional university which the centres belong to. In its quest to improve the quality of life of the member body, the U3A movement is to seek a learning environment that is more dynamic in nature, one which facilitates

learners who are able to take control and direct learning; learners who are enabled to continue learning after a course has finished; learners who, in their daily lives, know how to put into practice learning they have undertaken; [...] and learners who develop strategies that enable them to know how to go about the business of learning (Gladdish, 2010, p. 15).

This is possible if learning environments at U3As drop traditional “top-bottom” approaches in favour of a situation that places the teacher and learner in a dynamic relationship. Although teachers will always keep hold some level of authority on the learning session since it is their responsibility to create and sustain the right environment for learning to occur, older learners should have an opportunity to have a say in directing both the nature and content of the learning that takes place. Following Gladdish (2010), successful learning in later life relies on consideration and consensus to drive activity, one which involves negotiation, advocacy, intervention, promotion, and sometimes compromise. In short, «it is about creating something new with, as well as behalf of other» (*ibid.*, p. 10).

Quality of instruction The quality of instruction is also to be put under scrutiny as it is important that older learners do not fall back on the educational experience of their youth. Top-bottom approaches to educational instruction are to be avoided. Instead, course tutors should enable older adults to foster the control that they may be consciously or unconsciously lacking through encouragement to take responsibility for their learning by choosing those methods and resources by which they want to learn. A

useful strategy here is to emphasise the importance of personal goal setting at the beginning of the course schedule and encourage it through activities such as making a personal statement of what the learners want to achieve. Facilitating learning in later life thrives on collaborative and partnership, and is characterised by “co-operative work” between tutors and learners (Gladdish, 2010). Tutors are also encouraged to draw on the life experiences of learners by allowing them to share examples of their experiences with the class and encouraging them to think about how those examples relate to class information. Course material that is presented in a way that reflects the “real world”, rather than some abstract component, is very popular with older learners. It is important for facilitators to synchronise themselves with the life course experience of learners, born around World War II, and who lived their teenage and early adult years in the fifties and sixties. Nevertheless, U3As must not assume that older learners continue living in some by-gone world. Rather, e-learning has become increasingly popular in later life as it offers the opportunity for older learners to access information and communicate with others when and if they want to. For U3As to continue being relevant to contemporary elders, centres must make more effort to embed their learning strategies in the web 2.0 revolution that now provides extremely user-friendly applications. Contrary to its predecessor, web 2.0 uses interactive tools – ranging from Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, online journals, to virtual picture databases – to offer limitless possibilities for an interactive, empowering, and participatory form of older adult learning.

Quality of curricula The relevance of taught content warrants careful attention since it tends to influence the extent that older persons are attracted to and benefit from the learning experience. The curriculum at U3As should be as bold and original as possible, negotiated with, and even determined by, the most vital interests of learners. However, this does not mean that U3A centres do not have any part to play in the choice of subjects. As Gladdish (2010, p. 36) affirms, «learning providers must be part of the debate that identifies appropriate curricula for older people, and they need to exercise professional judgement and integrity about their ability or otherwise to contribute to development and delivery». More specifically, there is a real urgency for U3As to include non-liberal and health related areas of learning such as financial literacy and caregiving, but especially, scientific courses that introduce learners to environmental, botanical and zoological studies. Since the correlation between later life and illiteracy is well-known, U3As would do well to set up literacy courses for older persons, a move that would help in mitigating the

oft mentioned charge of elitism. Moreover, the introduction of new areas of study may function for U₃As to become successful in attracting non-typical learners such as older men (e.g. gardening, toy modelling, astronomy) and ethnic minorities (e.g. martial arts, origami, tai-chi). U₃As must also coordinate intergenerational learning sessions that include curricula catering for learners from the whole of the life course, and hence, linking third agers with children, teenagers, adults and even older peers. Specific activities may include book clubs, community work and film screenings, drama, as well as adoptive grandparent-grandchild relations. U₃As would also do well to adopt curricula that operate on the principles of situated learning. A promising avenue in this respect is environmental volunteering where U₃A can link up with eco-friendly organisations that provide both learning opportunities as well as possibilities for green volunteering. Older persons possess a maturity of judgement, and therefore, are highly apt to highlight the imperative need to create a sustainable society and conserve our natural resources.

15.8 Conclusion

This paper began by tracing the origins and modern developments of the U₃A movement. U₃As vary in size and resources, and their development is inevitably uneven. However, all are united in their efforts to provide learning opportunities for older adults, as well as increasing the visibility of older generations whose presence and worth is easily undervalued and overlooked. U₃As also remind governments and educational bodies of the actual meaning of the words “lifelong learning”, providing a niche for a category of citizens who are left out in the cold as far as learning opportunities are concerned, as governments continue to cling on to traditional models of education geared towards production, profitability and employability. However, this paper also brought forward the difficulties that the U₃A movement is currently experiencing, and the possible and actual biases that centres may experience. One cannot let the successes of the U₃A movement overshadow the fact that the movement caters little for older men, elders from ethnic minorities, and others experiencing physical and cognitive difficulties. To help overcome such lacunae, this paper also provided a number of suggestions for the future role for U₃As, ranging from embracing a broader vision of learning, improving the quality of learning, instruction and curricula, as well as a wider participation agenda that attracts elders experiencing physical and cognitive challenges.

Section II

Quality of Life and Lifelong Learning

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Section III

Third Age and Activity: Hypothesis and Experiences

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