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## Universities of the Third Age

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## Definition

Universities of the Third Age (U3As) can be loosely defined as “socio-cultural centres where senior citizens may 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, with the objective of preserving their vitality and participating in the life of the community” (Midwinter 1984: 68). As its title postulates, the U3A's target audience are people in the third age phase of their life course. While some centers put one's 60th birthday as a prerequisite for membership, others adopt a more flexible approach by opening membership to all persons above the age of 50.

## French Origins

Following legislation passed by the French government in 1968, which obliged universities to become responsible for the provision of lifelong education, the summer of 1972 saw Pierre Vellas coordinating at the University of Toulouse a summer program of lectures, guided tours, and other cultured activities, for retired persons (Radcliffe 1984). When the program came to end, the enthusiasm of participants showed no signs of abating, so Vellas (1997) planned a new series of learning program for 1973 under the term University of the Third Age (U3A). The first U3A was open to anyone who had reached statutory retirement age at that time and willing to pay a nominal fee. Learning activities were scheduled for daylight hours, 5 days a week, for 8 or 9 months of the year. The first curriculum, at Toulouse, focused on a range of gerontological subjects, although in subsequent years, subject content became mainly in the humanities. Although lectures were combined with debates, field trips, and recreational opportunities, the French academic maxim of “teachers lecture, students listen” was constantly upheld. Indeed, all U3As during the 1970s operated through a more or less 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. The Toulouse initiative struck a rich vein of motivation so that, just 3 years later, U3As were already established in Belgium, Switzerland, Poland, Italy, Spain, and Quebec in Canada. Such popularity was due to the fact that the U3A movement, in marked contrast to the tradition of centralized educational management, provided an opportunity to sow the first seeds of educational innovation and reform. In Radcliffe’s (1984: 65) words, “the resort of those to whom a fair measure of educational opportunity has been denied...a challenge in support of the right to life-long education.” The Francophone model brings both potential advantages and risks. U3As adhering to this model are generally successful in accessing funds, retaining nominal

enrolment fees (as they make free use of university resources), and implementing any course that strikes the members’ fancy due to the large of pool of teaching personnel at the university. Yet, lectures generally take place upon university campuses which tend to be far away from residential centers and, thus, inaccessible for many older adults. Francophone U3As are also characterized by a lack of agency, as the academic body has the last say on every matter and total decision-making power on the aspects relating to learning (Formosa 2012).

## British Reactions

The first U3A in Britain was established in Cambridge, in July 1981, and quickly replicated in other cities and towns. The British version underwent a substantial change compared to the original French model, with Midwinter (1984: 3) going as far as to describe the use of the title “U3A” as “an unashamed burglary of the continental usage.” Laslett (1989) set three principles for the British U3A movement: first, a third age principle where members are expected to take some responsibility, in particular, to ensure that any potential members might have the opportunity to join the U3A ranks; second, a self-help learning principle as members gather and immobilize themselves into learning circles, utilizing as broad a selection of themes as they think fit; and, finally, a mutual-aid principle as each U3As is organized on the cooperative precept, totally autonomous and self-sufficient. The hallmark of British U3As is that its self-help and mutual aid approach makes possible nominal membership fees; accessible classes that run in community halls, libraries, and private homes; flexible timetables and negotiable curricula and teaching styles; wide course variety that ranges from the highly academic to arts and crafts; no academic constraints such as entrance requirements or examinations; and the opportunity to mix with alert like-minded people who enjoy doing new things. Since in the absence of any financial and administrative support from official authorities

sessions often take place in members' own homes, British U3As are also successful in promoting what Illich (1973: 110) termed as "learning webs" – that is, "reticular structures for mutual access...to the public and designed to spread equal opportunity for learning and teaching." However, the British model is not immune to potential risks and drawbacks. First, the British U3A movement has become the victim of its own success in that its triumph in attracting more learners gave rise to issues in locating suitable venues and enough volunteers to run courses of study and interest groups. Second, Laslett's (1989: 22) criterion that "no support from the funds of local or central government shall be expected or sought," so as to avoid financial and political dependency, is debatable. Such an option overlooks the fact that local authorities and national governments have a moral duty to support the activities of voluntary organizations. Finally, the presence of professionally trained "teachers/lecturers" does not necessarily threaten the affirmed U3As' objects and principles. While it is possible that the autonomy and freedom of teaching and learning in the U3As will be harmed if the facilitators are sent to participate in the uniform and standard training courses, it is equally conceivable that members may not have the ability to teach or communicate effectively.

## Contemporary Developments

The U3A movement has not only withstood the test of time but is also marked by an extensive increase of centers and members all over the continents. Although comparative statistics are lacking, it has been reported that in 2017 Australia included 300 U3As, with a membership around the 100,000 mark, and its neighbor New Zealand held 84 U3As which included some 4,000 members at the end of 2017. Figures for Britain reached over 1,000 U3As (400,000 members) at the end of 2017, and a 2013 Interest Group Survey revealed that there are in excess of 36,000 U3A interest groups in the region (Withnall 2016). While as expected, walking, history, and "going out" have been listed as the most popular activities, bus restoration, Druidism, and

unsolved murder mysteries were other unusual subjects on offer (Withnall 2016). In the Asian continent, China alone included 60,867 U3As and around 7,643,100 members in 2015 (Teaching Study Department Guangzhou Elderly University 2017).

Although many U3As 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" models (Formosa 2014). Culturally hybrid U3As include both Francophone and British elements. U3As in Finland are affiliated with a university program and use university resources, but then rely heavily on "local learning groups" of older people to define the curricula so that they are characterized by an open door policy and are essentially cooperative unions. French-speaking U3As in Quebec, Canada, form part of a traditional university, but then are seriously intent on blurring the distinction between higher education and third age learning. South American U3As are also close to the Francophone model as they are characterized 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, they are also typified by a strong concern for the most deprived and vulnerable sectors of the older population – which is surely very atypical to the Francophone model whose value orientations tend to be apolitical and, at times, even elitist. 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. Of course, there are U3As which do not fit either of the models expanded herein. For example, U3As in Taiwan are neither attached to universities nor are they self-help organizations. Instead they have been established, managed, and financed by local authorities, with teaching carried out by professional teachers (Huang 2005).

U3As are also no exception to the e-learning revolution. Initially, the scope of online courses was to reach out to older persons who could not join their peers in the classroom setting such as those living in remote areas and the homebound (Swindell 2011). However, the coming of Web 2.0 Internet Revolution, in union with steep increases in digital competence in later life, made virtual U3As – such as U3A Online – increasingly popular with third agers. One strength of volunteer-based virtual learning is that it has few expensive overheads, as there are no salaries to pay, no expensive insurance costs, and no health-safety concerns (Formosa 2010a).

### Benefits and Predicaments

A systematic review of studies focusing on the key determinants enabling older persons to experience productive, successful, and active aging finds that continued learning in later life constitutes a key factor (Formosa 2010b, 2016). Although one finds no longitudinal research on the relationship between U3A membership on the one hand, and improvement in physical and cognitive wellbeing on the other, it is not surprising that various cross-sectional studies outlined how U3As bring about direct health benefits for their members (Niedzielska et al. 2017). 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 is a frequent correlation in third age research (Tomagová et al. 2016). A study on the relationship between emotional 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 program 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: 224). U3As are also to be commended for resolving the tensions arising from the push toward the productive use of one’s free time and the pull of “liberation” or “well-earned rest” of retirement. Indeed, when members are asked what they gain from their involvement in U3A activities, the first thing that they usually report is not generally related to the learning activities per se but associated social outcomes such as making new friends and joining support groups (Ordonez et al. 2011).

Despite such notable impacts, research also uncovered a range of lacunae. A consistent criticism leveled at U3As is that of elitism, as both survey and ethnographic data uncover a compounding class divide among membership bodies (Formosa 2000, 2007). Although U3As offer no hindrances to admission, membership bodies tend to be exceedingly middle class. Indeed, while middle-class elders joining U3As mean going back to an arena in which they feel confident and self-assured of its outcome and development, working-class elders are apprehensive to join an organization with such a “heavy” class baggage in its title. U3As have also been criticized for including gender biases that work against the interests of both men and women. On one hand, Formosa (2005) noted how U3As tend to be characterized 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 homogenous population which contributed toward a “malestream” learning environment. On the other hand, the low percentage of male participants signals strongly that the organization is not attractive to them. After all, most U3As include study units that generally reflect the interests of a female audience rather than conventional male interest in the physical and natural sciences. Another predicament is that U3As rarely include ethnic minorities in their membership bodies, even in multicultural cities such as Sydney and Auckland, or older persons experiencing physical and cognitive difficulties (Formosa 2016). This is surprising considering

that many older adults experience various health-related difficulties which impinge negatively upon their functional mobility and intellectual capacity.

## Future Challenges

As the U3A movement reached its 45th birthday, the key challenge facing the U3A movement is to remain relevant to the life world of present and incoming older cohorts. Indeed, U3As generally overlook how incoming older cohorts are characterized 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. Remaining germane to the contemporary social fabric requires four concurrent strategies. First, overcoming French-British polarities as the benefits of collaborative approaches between official and mutual-aid sectors 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: 26). Second, improving the quality of learning, instruction, and curricula, pushing toward a learning environment that is more dynamic in nature, and 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" (Gladdish 2010: 15). While top-bottom and banking approaches to teaching are to be avoided, curricula should be as bold and original as possible, also including non-liberal and health areas of learning such as environmental, botanical, and zoological studies. Finally, for the U3A movement to be a really valid exemplary of late-life learning, its activities must also branch out to older people who experience health difficulties. Strategies may include providing adequate transport facilities to and back from the learning center, having sessions taking place in learners' residences and care homes.

## Summary

Universities of the Third Age (U3As) can be loosely defined as sociocultural centers where senior citizens may acquire new knowledge of significant issues or validate the knowledge which they already possess. While some U3As are attached to traditional universities and colleges, others are sturdily autonomous and wholly dependent on the efforts of volunteers. One also finds a variety of ethos, ranging from the provision of a traditional type of liberal arts education, to the organization of interest-group activities conducted through peer learning, to showing solidarity with vulnerable sectors of the older population. Academic commentaries on the U3A movement have been both supportive and critical. While U3As have been lauded for leading older learners to improved levels of physical, cognitive, social, and psychological well-being, other studies emphasize how many centers incorporate strong gender, social class, ageist, and ethnic biases. It is augured that in future years the U3A movement will continue to be relevant to incoming cohorts of older adults only by embracing a broader vision of learning; improving the quality of learning, instruction, and curricula; as well as including a wider participation agenda that caters for older adults experiencing physical and cognitive challenges.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning](#)
- ▶ [Senior Learning](#)

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