No, I’m not going to reminisce about John (Lennon in case you were wondering).

A group of women smiling for a photo

Description automatically generated**Imagine you are in your early twenties** and for some reason have decided to investigate ‘The Power of Connection: Reducing Loneliness through u3a’s Innovative Programmes’ for your B.A. Thesis in a foreign country! Being a student in The Netherlands at Utrecht University you somehow end up being recommended to contact Croydon.

I must point out that there are no u3as in The Netherlands so exploring how another nation and culture operates provided opportunities. Two students, Tess and Sherida, came to GB for 10 weeks being completely self-funded.

A group of people around a table

Description automatically generatedI asked them on their last day, if they had been nervous – two young women coming for an extended stay to meet a load of ‘oldies’. Well, you would be, wouldn’t you? The first time we met on February 5th 2024, they were obviously quite nervous to start of with. Coming into the hall full of retired yogis, being given mats and incorporated into the session and then after a short break joining a Tai Chi group! Their first introduction dispelled their fears and many myths. Our members had been informed about the purpose of the research visits – to find out how being a member of the u3a promotes well-being and enhances the quality of life. Discussions have continued throughout the ten weeks with the students taking part in many Interest Groups face to face or on-line, attending General Meetings, talking to small focus groups and members on an individual basis.

The original concept was to listen to people’s stories rather than read about the lives of older people written by third parties. Their background had involved lots of research on ageing but not with aged people, so their aim was focused on participant observation to gather a greater understanding of of loneliness and the effect of that on health and how u3a membership and involvement mitigates against those.

One member said, ‘I thought that Tess & Sherida’s research was very interesting and important.- not least because ultimately it was about the quality of human life. At the core of this work was the concept of ‘culture’ and the recognition that this feeds into understanding of people, which consequently helps when considering future developments, to create an even more positive environment.’

A group of people dancing in a room

Description automatically generatedAfter participating in many physical Interest Group activities – yoga, Tai Chi, Line Dancing, TableTennis, Walking, Darts, Dance Exercise, International Dance and even Belly Dancing, as well as the more sedentary groups from Wine Admiration, Book, Poetry and Writing Groups, to Art Appreciation, Painting and Drawing, China Group and MOTO they were well and truly hooked. They also joined a number on Interest Groups On-Line meetings to explore the different connections members make compared with face-to-face meetings.

‘They expressed both interest and enjoyment, meeting everyone and learning about how the u3a played a very important part in addressing issues for an older population.  I very much enjoyed their company

and am looking forward to be able to read about what was learnt from this sustained and thorough research. They were both an absolute credit to their university and will be missed’, was another comment.

Here are some other comments from members =

A group of people posing for a photo

Description automatically generatedIt was wonderful to have 2 such lovely 'young' ladies take such an in-depth interest in us 'oldies’.

‘Tess and Sherida were always very friendly and keen to talk to us about how the u3a enriches our retirement.  They joined in all the exercise classes with enthusiasm and were impressed with how hard we worked at keeping fit. We will miss them.’

‘It’s been a pleasure and privilege to meet and speak with Tess and Sherida, their interest, enthusiasm and involvement with so many groups and members has been amazing.’

A person and person standing together

Description automatically generated

‘We will miss them and their lovely smiles and I will look forward to seeing the result of their hard work.’

‘As Tess and Sherida proved to us, the young can learn from the past and the elders embrace the future. By becoming each other’s strengths, we can chart a course towards a more fulfilling and enriching future, ensuring that the road ahead is not just walked quickly but walked wisely.’

**And a final comment from the students themselves =**

Croydon u3a is full of wonderful, friendly people whom we are grateful to have met, because their energy, positive mindset, and warmth towards Tess & I has truly inspired me as a young adult. I will miss all of them, and the fun activities ;)!”

**So as I see it there have been huge benefits on both sides –**

* The opportunity for some solid intergenerational conversations;
* u3a members’ opinions and life experiences listened to and valued;
* members actively helping young people and vice versa;
* pushing the boundaries for all readers of the finished documents about what life is like for some people who are no longer working fulltime;
* raising some questions such as the gender imbalance;
* providing a positive experience for students working in a foreign country.

**I am personally very pleased that Croydon u3a was identified as a ‘good bet’ by staff in the Trust office. I am delighted that the meetings and contacts worked well and feel so proud of our members who welcomed the students with open arms and hearts, many sharing very personal stories**.

We wish them well and look forward to reading the finished work.

Jenny Wilson