

WHAT IS THE u3a ALL ABOUT?



Founded over 35 years ago, in France by Prof. Pierre Vellas, with a model whereby each University of the Third Age group was attached to or associated with a local university. This academic model is used in many other countries, in particular in continental Europe.

However, when the concept reached the United Kingdom in the early 1980s, the aims to encourage groups of people in their third age to come together and continue their enjoyment of learning in subjects of interest to them remained the same. But, under the influence of a group of leading educationalists, Peter Laslett, Michael Young and Eric Midwinter, the UK model and its nature was radically changed to move away from the influence and dependence of a local university to much more locally based self-help organisation. It was to have been on the French style, but it soon became obvious that in the UK 'Third Agers' were perfectly capable of looking after themselves. So, in 1982 an experimental school was set up attended by a group of interested people and as a result several U3As were launched and the Third Age Trust as a charity followed in 1983.

However, the term University was retained and has been seen as a problem for some, as it promoted the idea of academic elitism which discouraged a number of people from joining. Recently there has been a quiet movement away from the 'university' element in the title and more emphasis on the 'third Age', to quietly forget the unhelpful 'university' term.

From the start, the guiding principles were to promote lifelong learning through self-help interest groups covering a wide range of topics and activities as chosen by their members. The 'third age' is defined by a time in your life (not necessarily chronological) where you have the opportunity to undertake learning for its own sake. There is no minimum age, but a focus on people who are no longer in full-time employment or raising a family.

The UK model envisaged a collaborative approach with peers learning from each other. The u3a movement was to be self-funded, with members not working towards qualifications but learning purely for pleasure. There would be no distinction between the learners and the teachers – everyone could take a turn at being both if they wished.

From its beginnings in 1981, the movement grew very quickly and by the early 1990s, a U3A was opening every fortnight. U3As grew in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and in 2008 membership was increasing by 11% every year. 2010 saw our membership hitting the quarter million mark.

LOCAL u3a BRANCHES.

The UK network comprises in excess of 1,000 groups, in towns and cities; as of January 2020, total membership now exceeded 450,000. Each U3A is formally structured as an independent self-financing and self-managing charity with links to the Third Age Trust, a national coordinating body. Each individual U3A comprises a number of activity groups which may cover a wide range of different topics - e.g. arts, languages, physical activity, discussion, and games. Most U3A's are centred on a particular town or region and their activity groups meet in a hired hall or small groups meet in a member's house. Although primarily for the retired, many U3As open their membership to any people not in full-time employment.

In 2009 the Virtual University of the Third Age (vU3A) was launched with the intention of offering the same friendship, support and learning enjoyed by off-line groups. vU3A is affiliated to the Third Age Trust in the UK. vU3A is open to anyone, in particular those who, by circumstances of isolation, health problems or other restrictions, cannot get to a U3A group.

CENTRAL ORGANISATION

There is a u3a Board made up of u3a members from across the movement who volunteer their time. They have been elected by the u3a membership to guide the governance and direction of the movement. The Board members have been exploring how to ensure the views of members are better represented in the governance of u3a.