



## University of the Third Age online

### Using ICT for learning

The University of the Third Age Online (U3A Online) applies the voluntary, self-help principles of a conventional university of the third age in an online environment, to meet in particular the needs of isolated older people. 'Isolated' in this context means people who cannot attend a conventional U3A because of disabilities, their geographic location or because they are carers with home responsibilities.

### Learning throughout life

The international U3A movement gives older people opportunities to continue learning throughout life in an informal environment. The rapidly growing U3A movement in Australia applies self-help and adult learning principles, and promotes the concept of having community-based groups organise programs based on the interests of their members (McDonnell 1998).

A feature of U3A Online's development has been interaction between the project management group and a number of agencies and institutions, which helped elaborate the concept and develop it into operational form (Braxton 1999). These included EdNA, the national Internet focal point for the education sectors, Adult Learning Australia, the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, and the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) (Braxton 1999, pp.2-4).

U3A Online secured its first grant through DETYA as a project for IYOP, the International year of Older Persons. The Department of Health and Aged Care, and the Department of Education, Science and Training have provided subsequent funding. Further, crucial assistance came from Griffith University in Queensland, who hosted the website free of charge and provided technical support.

While the U3A Online concept has evolved since it began, two themes have remained constant and continue to drive its development. It will continue to provide a virtual U3A for older people, especially people in isolated circumstances, and it will continue to provide a resource for conventional U3A groups and members.

U3A Online is run by a group of enthusiastic volunteers across Australia and New Zealand. They maintain contact by email and contribute many hours of their time. This volunteerism is a particular strength of U3A Online, because development and administration costs are kept low, and the enterprise is able to tap the experience of a diverse group of members.



The courses are developed by volunteers and participants can choose between two modes: self-paced, where individuals learn at their own pace, and course groups which run over a period of up to 12 weeks with a course leader. About 25 courses are presently available online and more are always in preparation. They cover a range of subjects such as astronomy, Antarctica, ageing and retirement, history, autobiography and journalism, and religions of the world.

The mode of learning that participants choose impacts on how virtual communities of learners are built. Research during U3A Online's development has shown that many older people prefer to learn by themselves rather than with a course leader at a particular

time and the self-paced option caters for this. However, this preference limits online interactions between participants.

The 'participant decides' philosophy of U3A Online means that there is potential for further exploitation of this initiative for building community through a web of virtual communities

From the outset U3A Online has been directed at providing opportunities for informal learning via the Internet. While the first priority has always been isolated older people, no older people were excluded. Isolation was broadly defined to include people who have disabilities or other constraints on participation in U3A groups, as well as people in remote and rural locations. It was intended from the beginning that U3A collaborative self-help principles would be applied to the online environment as the medium's potential to help learners with particular needs was explored.

U3A Online was the world's first virtual U3A with nothing similar anywhere else from which it might emulate or gather ideas. In the beginning its very small management team of three enthusiasts and a part-time paid coordinator had to resort to seizing opportunities as they opened up, gradually developing strategic planning. The coordinator was available only in the early stages and only volunteers have been 'employed' ever since.

There are perhaps two key areas where further development of U3A Online may be expected:

- an expansion to include more isolated and disadvantaged people, including people in remote and rural areas, those with various



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forms of disability, Indigenous groups and people with limited formal education (this line of development is discussed below and is dependent on further partnership building and the securing of better resources)

- a strengthening of existing international links and the development of new ones
- a likely extension of existing links with New Zealand and Britain (U3A Online members can enrol in British courses under agreed arrangements and vice versa).

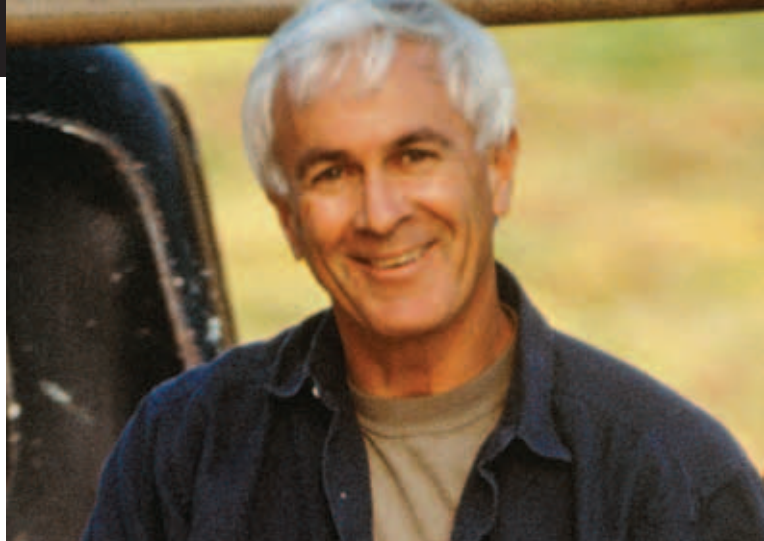
U3A has an informal arrangement with the University of Ulm in Germany under which the university is translating several U3A Online courses and evaluating how older Germans react to learning via the Internet (Swindell and Dale 2003 p.6). If the German trial is successful, that could lead to further internationalisation of U3A Online.

### Barriers and needs

U3A Online is a low-cost self-help concept and there is likely to be growing demand for its services in an ageing population. Generational change and the retirement of a younger generation with ICT skills and different lifestyle expectations mean that demand for this service is likely to grow and that the concept is sustainable.

Early on, many U3A members did not find the concept easy to grasp nor the benefits it could bring to disadvantaged people (Braxton 1999, p.3). This was very largely because in 1999 comparatively few members and U3A management committees were using computers.

Today the two largest networks in Australia, umbrella organisations for more than 100 conventional U3A groups, have become members of U3A Online to show their support.



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Similarly a number of the individual U3As have also joined both to support the project and to make use of the resources U3A Online offers.

The project is still not as well-known in many rural and isolated areas, or among many organisations serving other groups of older people who are isolated or disabled. This is largely a promotion problem, flowing from the low resource base of U3A. While much of the U3A Online work can be covered by the collaborative self-help methods used, marketing to target groups requires additional funding.

The enthusiasm of its volunteers, many of whom are themselves in their 70s and even 80s, government funding and support from Griffith University and other associations has sustained U3A Online up to this point, and a further stage of alliance and partnership building may now be needed so that wider community understanding of the role and benefits of the U3A Online service can be achieved.



## Key lessons

- There is value in applying the U3A self-help principles to the online environment and providing low-cost learning opportunities for people isolated and disadvantaged in access to learning opportunities. It is now widely recognised that learning throughout life brings broader benefits such as a healthy lifestyle and civic participation, and personal and community well-being.
- While the U3A movement has a significant place in providing low-cost learning opportunities for older people, U3A Online adds a further dimension through the potential of the Internet. The U3A Online model is now well developed and has been a story of seizing opportunities with limited resources. The challenge is now to promote this concept more widely, especially to older 'isolated' people and those with disabilities so that these groups are enabled to continue learning throughout life.

## Resources

Braxton D 1999, Foreword in Swindell & Vassella 1999.

McDonnell J 1998, *Later Life Learning in Australia—The Why and How of U3As*, [www4.gu.edu.au/ext/u3a](http://www4.gu.edu.au/ext/u3a).

Swindell R 2002, *U3A Online: A Virtual University of The Third Age for Isolated Older Persons*, [www4.gu.edu.au/ext/u3a](http://www4.gu.edu.au/ext/u3a)

Swindell R & Dale L 2003, *Enriching the Lives of Older Members of a Multicultural Society*, [www4.gu.edu.au/ext/u3a](http://www4.gu.edu.au/ext/u3a).

# COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

## More information

In these case studies, communities, nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences and lessons they have learnt using ICT: enhancing capability and service delivery; supporting and building communities, networks and connections; and overcoming barriers and challenges.

*Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006* emphasises the need to ensure that all Australians can participate in the benefits of the information economy.

Key strategies in 2004–06 will be to strengthen collaboration and capabilities in nonprofit organisations, facilitate the creative use of ICT for building stronger communities and social cohesion, and develop networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers.

**For more information visit the DCITA website [www.dcita.gov.au](http://www.dcita.gov.au) or email [community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au](mailto:community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au).**

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