



# YEARNING FOR LEARNING IN REGIONAL RETIREMENT: SEEKING TO SATISFY THIS THROUGH THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

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## ABSTRACT

*Constant change necessitates lifelong learning for those in the workforce, if they are not to fall behind in the skills and knowledge needed as their occupations evolve. Learning new skills and knowledge remains a part of life for those no longer in paid employment. Not only is learning essential in order to keep up with changing needs and opportunities, and with new technologies used by businesses and service-deliverers, but also many retired persons feel that engaging in learning activities improves their quality of life. In some locations, an avenue where retired people seek 'adventures in learning' is the University of the Third Age (U3A), thereby also meeting some of their social needs. This paper reports on a small research project investigating the impact of a provincial U3A on some of its members. An update on current participation and activities is included, along with suggestions for further development.*

## INTRODUCTION

Discussions on the need for lifelong learning often focus upon the necessity for re-skilling in response to rapid change in the workforce and in modern society in general. Skills learned in the past become out of date or inadequate and new skills must be learned in order to equip individuals for ever-changing occupational and social environments. However, these needs are not restricted to those who are earning a living. People who have left the workforce through retirement because of age or ill health cannot help but continue to learn; moreover, many experience the need to be involved in active, as well as incidental, learning experiences. One organisation that seeks to fulfil these learning needs of seniors is the University of the Third Age (U3A), which has branches in many parts of the nation and throughout the world.

After a brief introduction to the U3A, the relationship of a regional branch with its local university campus and the composition of the group are described in this article, with a summary of their activities in recent years. Insights gleaned from a small research project involving members of the Whyalla branch of the U3A are outlined. (A condensed outline of some of the findings was the subject of an earlier poster presentation: Ellis, 2000.) An update on the current participation and activities of the group is given, along with some suggestions for future directions.

While the focus is on a particular group of adult learners in a regional city, it is quite possible that members of U3A groups in metropolitan areas may have similar experiences and views of learning and comparable motivations and outcomes.

Nevertheless, the Whyalla U3A story is a story worth telling as a glimpse of one aspect of rural education. Can we really call them 'rural' learners? The definition of 'rural' is not fixed. Definitions used in discussions of rurality in Australia and elsewhere can involve occupations of inhabitants, predominant land use, demographics, geography, and ease of access to resources and services (Bourke & Lockie, 2001; Griffith, 2003; Western, McMillan & Durrington, 1998; Zapf, 2001). While most would agree that the term excludes metropolitan areas on the one hand, and includes farming areas on the other, it is appropriate to think of a rural-urban continuum (Cheers, 1998), which can be held to include provincial cities, particularly small ones. Whyalla currently has a population of fewer than 22,000, and is 'rural' rather than 'urban' or 'isolated', according to a 1992 Department of Primary Industry and Energy classification by postcode (Martin, 1994). Whatever label may be used for themselves by residents of Whyalla, with its mix of heavy industry, small business and services also accessed by outlying pastoral and farming areas, metropolitan residents are likely to regard them as living 'in the country'.

### **AGEING AUSTRALIANS AND THEIR POTENTIAL**

In 1998, 12 per cent of the Australian population were aged 65 years and over. This proportion is expected to rise to 24 per cent by 2051 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000). Hence, this group of older Australians represents increasingly significant social needs; however, they are also the providers of increasingly significant contributions to society. Of all the Australian states, South Australia has the highest percentage of older people and the fastest predicted growth of this age group over the next few decades: it is estimated that the over 65s will constitute a quarter of the South Australian population by 2031 (*International Year of Older Persons*, 1999, pp. 9-10).

The International Year of Older Persons (1999) drew attention to a wide range of issues, opportunities and challenges involving this age group, and also younger early-retired persons. Highlights of the Year were the activities celebrating the achievements of older persons and the vital contribution they make to their communities (*Harnessing the Wisdom*, 1999). Such contributions were further demonstrated in the stories brought to public attention by the 2001 International Year of the Volunteer (many volunteers being retired people), and were celebrated in Seniors Week and later the Celebrate Seniors Festival (2002). They continue to be highlighted in annual Every Generation programs and associated Positive Ageing awards (*50 Something Extra*, December/January 2003, p. 3; COTA, 2005), and by local councils' and other organisations' awards to seniors. A study of productive ageing underlined the contributions of older people:

Older adults reinforce the social fabric and help to prevent other people falling through the gaps. They can do this because of their familiarity with their immediate environment and their intimate knowledge of people in their social network. Many older adults do not retreat from life but remain actively involved and fulfil vital social roles which younger people may be too busy to fulfil. (Ranzijn & Grbich 2001, p. 64) (See also Jones, n.d.; Ranzijn, Harford & Andrews, 2002; World Health Organization, 1999.)

### **LEARNING IN THE 'THIRD AGE'**

Not only do older people experience the desire, and in many cases the need, to learn, it can also be argued that enabling this is a matter of social justice and 'is concerned equally with combating social exclusion or social disqualification as providing

opportunities for self fulfilment and active participation in the cultural life of the community' (Elmore 1999, p. 13). Where there are opportunities for them to learn with younger people, both groups can benefit from the diversity of experience and viewpoints, as can also occur in intergenerational work situations, for example when an older person is mentoring a younger (Withnall, 2002), or a younger is inducting an elder into modern technological possibilities. What has been called 'generativity' is another factor involved in older people's learning activities: the idea 'that from midlife adults are preoccupied with establishing and guiding the next generation and with making their mark on the world in a way that will be remembered positively after their death' (*Testing midlife preoccupations* 1999, p. 62).

Throughout life, being active mentally and physically has innumerable benefits. As Seedsman writes, 'To be meaningful, life ought always to be work in progress. Anything else is a form of voluntary retrenchment from a labour of the utmost importance' (1994, p. v). He further emphasises that '... regular engagement in meaningful activities contributes to the health and wellness of older persons' (p. 95). Building up 'cognitive reserve' through learning activities has been shown to 'cushion people against age-related decline' (Melton 2005, p. 35). The desire and habit of learning will also be valuable as people move on to a less independent 'fourth age'. Apart from simply satisfying the individual's thirst for knowledge, continuing to learn can have wider benefits: 'Recent evidence points to the health benefits of continued learning in later life and the positive effects for quality of life, lessening dependency and reducing care costs' (NIACE 2002, p. 2). While ageing tends to involve slowing down in some areas of life, the later years can be ones where more time can be devoted to other pursuits. Baltes and others have developed a principle, Selective Optimisation with Compensation (SOC), which can be a guide to later years: choosing to do what can be done well and with enjoyment; maintaining and improving on these skills; and making up for any decline with whatever human and technological assistance is available (Ranzijn, 1999). For example, a love of reading could be hampered by failing eyesight, but compensation could include making use of talking books.

While there are many possible options for satisfying the need or desire to learn among older members of society, financial and access restrictions may limit what is feasible. With age discrimination legislation in place, there can be no bars on the grounds of age to older people wishing to pursue formal education programs in adult-entry secondary classes or tertiary education. However, for people on relatively fixed incomes, course fees may be an insurmountable barrier. There has been an increase in numbers of older South Australians participating in further education; however, they made up less than 1 per cent of tertiary students in 1998 (*Older South Australians* 2000, Fact Sheet 11). This was identified a decade ago by the State Government's Office for the Ageing as an area where opportunities and incentives need to be explored (*Ageing: A Ten Year Plan* 1996, p. 23). Flexible delivery of courses at a distance, for example through Open Learning Australia, may be an advantage to people without easy access to transport, but again costs may be an impediment. Informal arrangements may suit the pockets and the inclinations of many who do not feel driven to earn a formal qualification. The availability of neighbourhood centres, craft groups, 'schools for seniors', the Country Women's Association, book clubs, etc. vary from locality to locality. Adult Learners' Week activities have been held since 1995, and associated publications indicate the variety of opportunities available throughout the year (ALW, 2005; *A Guide to Adult Learning Opportunities*, 2001).

## **THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE**

The third age is the age of active retirement. It has been called 'the crown of life ... the time of personal self-realization and fulfilment', 'an age of personal achievement' (Laslett 1991, pp. vii & x). U3A branches are autonomous groups of people that meet together to continue learning purely for the love of it, with no prerequisite educational standard and no examinations. Ideally, members of those groups also contribute to the teaching of U3A courses and so U3A with its large component of peer education provides an example of self-help activities.

### **History**

After beginning in France in 1972, the U3A concept spread, an International Association of U3As being established in 1975. The concept was introduced into Britain in 1981. The first Australian U3A groups formed in Melbourne in 1984, and the first in South Australia in Adelaide in 1986. Colin Lawton, the founder of the Adelaide branch, has compiled a summary of some U3A history (Lawton, 2003). The French U3As were based on opening up university programs to older people, or running special courses for them, whereas the British U3As moved toward self-help principles, where teachers and taught were all part of the third age learning community. Australian U3As have been based in the main on the British model. (For another model, see Snijders, 1996.) The Whyalla group formed in mid 1996, after interest was gauged in a public meeting, 'the driving force behind the idea', being Pat Thomson (Uni of third Age gets the go ahead, 1996, p. 5). Following discussions with Whyalla people a Tumby Bay group began in 1999, but later discontinued. There are now sixteen South Australian U3A branches, both metropolitan and regional. South Australians also have access to U3Aonline (Swindell, 2003).

### **The members of U3A Whyalla**

At the time of the project reported on below (the beginning of the 2000 academic year) there were 45 paid-up members on the register. Numbers later increased to 81 in anticipation of computer classes starting, still a popular offering. Ages ranged from 50 up, with the majority being over 65. The membership included a number of couples, but the majority of individual members were women. Members had a wide range of occupational backgrounds. While most were of English-speaking background, the group included a small number of people of other language backgrounds. Most were retired people, but some of the University of South Australia staff who taught U3A courses from time to time also joined as members. A considerable number of paid-up members did not attend any classes in the early part of 2000, some waiting for particular classes to start (computing, or classes run by a particular lecturer). On the other hand, there were members who attended more than one of the classes on offer at any particular time. Some who joined particularly for computing did not go on to take part in other classes. The composition of the group in early 2006 is similar to what it was in 2000, with regard to gender balance and background, there currently (June 2006) being 53 members. Yearly numbers have ranged from 50 to 70, and in the decade of its existence about 200 individuals altogether have been involved.

### **Whyalla U3A Courses**

In the first five years courses varied according to the availability of leaders with time and the expertise and interests of the members. Topics included: history (both ancient and modern), philosophy, multiculturalism, French, introductory Latin, comparative religion (and sessions on various world religions), family history, scientific topics, calligraphy, cryptic crosswords, tai chi, consumer contracts, the Australian Constitution, creative writing, critical thinking, communication skills, and computer skills. Some one-off excursions (such as a trip to visit an iron ore mine) were included in the program. In 2001, new classes included Indian cooking, a series on rural health and an unstructured discussion group. The unavailability of some of the usual lecturers led to some sessions early in 2002 and since, being based on the discussion of videos. A wine appreciation course was a popular new option in 2002. Most classes were held in the afternoon, with some on weekday mornings and at one time a Saturday morning class.

The Whyalla U3A continues to provide a range of activities for its members. Sessions for the last part of 2005 included ones with a focus on learning new knowledge or skills, such as artists in ancient times, computing, painting, creative writing (leading to a published compilation of participants' work: *U3A – S.A. Whyalla Branch, 2005*), an introduction to digital cameras, astronomy, various one-off presentations, and other sessions in which a social element was the prime motivation for participation (quiz and games every Friday); this, however, was an outcome of all the classes. Other sessions combine social and fitness aspects: a walking group meets weekly at the Wetlands, and a weekly tai chi class was again held early in the year. An ongoing discussion group combines learning and social interaction, with people feeling free to raise questions and topics in a non-threatening context. Classes are spread throughout the week (Monday to Friday). Social afternoons are held about once a semester. Annual fees of \$20 per person still compare very favourably with those of U3A Adelaide (University of the Third Age Adelaide, 2005), a bonus made possible by the rent-free venues.

Since 2000 there have been some new recruits from the membership to the teaching role. Currently classes are being facilitated by U3A members and other people from the community, without University lecturer input. One member has been one of the instructors for computing classes; another has led a discussion group and sessions on Irish History. The Friday afternoon French classes, led for many years by a faithful member who has now moved to another part of the country, continue under the leadership of one of the members, helped by video input.

### **U3A Whyalla and the Whyalla Campus of the University of South Australia**

The campus is a sponsor of the Whyalla Branch of U3A. This relationship has included the use of facilities for many of the course groups and assistance with publicity. Lecturers current and retired, along with people from the wider community, have given their time to teach many of the courses. The keenness with which these older students show their commitment to lifelong learning has been a source of satisfaction for the lecturers involved.

The association has had benefits for both the U3A group and the campus: congenial venues for the U3A classes, with ready access to the campus library and other facilities, and another opportunity for the campus community to demonstrate that it is fulfilling the 'Serving the Community' part of the University's positioning statement. The expanded range of members of the learning community based at the campus has also

extended publicity and communication channels, increasing the awareness of what programs are available at the campus. Members' networks have been a conduit for publicising University events. U3A members have occasionally been included as resource people in undergraduate classes (e.g. philosophy in 2003), and this year have again offered their services. In such involvements their readiness to ask questions and contribute from their life experience has been appreciated by lecturers and beneficial to the students.

Whyalla Campus has recently implemented initiatives to raise the profile of the U3A on campus: there is now a dedicated room, clearly labelled as the U3A's. It includes tea-making facilities, and additions such as shelving for books and an antenna (so that television programs of interest can be recorded) have been willingly provided. Members also have access to rooms more suitable for other activities such as tai chi and computing. A membership badge incorporates both the University of South Australia and the U3A logos, to be worn in conjunction with name badges. There has been an obvious effort to acknowledge U3A and include members in other campus activities; for example, representatives of U3A were invited to the ceremony to mark the opening of the 2006 academic year.

## **THE PROJECT**

### **Aims and methodology**

A small project conducted early in 2000 sought to investigate the importance for U3A members of continuing to learn and the impact on them of their U3A participation. A paper-based questionnaire was included with a U3A newsletter sent out to all 45 members. Questions were also included to elicit information that the Committee could use in their planning. Recipients were also invited to make contact with the researcher if they were willing to take part in an interview in which they could talk at greater length on what U3A meant to them, but none took up this opportunity. However, informal discussions and feedback from members and lecturers have added to data gathered by the questionnaire. The researcher was also a participant observer, both as a teacher of some courses and as a student on occasion.

The questionnaires, approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee, were returned initially to the U3A committee, who recorded details needed for program planning, removed the name section and forwarded them as anonymous forms to the researcher. The voluntary nature of the survey was stressed, and respondents were asked to feel free to omit particular questions or to attach an extra sheet of paper with additional comments. An information sheet explaining the research and planning aims was distributed with the questionnaire.

### **The questionnaire**

A short participant profile section seeking information about gender, age group, first language, years involved in U3A and number of courses attended was followed by a series of open-ended questions on learning in the 'third age':

1. How important is it to you to keep learning new things?
2. Apart from U3A, what other avenues do you use for learning?
3. Any comments on other learning opportunities?

4. How do costs of these other opportunities compare with U3A?
5. What impact has U3A made in your life?
6. What have you learned about yourself and other people by attending U3A courses?
7. What is the best (or most interesting or most important) thing you've learned in a U3A course?
8. What has been the best thing about your involvement in U3A?

Further questions concerned future involvement: preferred subject areas (with some suggested and space for others); preferred days and times; and willingness to be involved in teaching courses. As well as providing information useful for U3A program planning, these also provided the researcher with additional information on the participants' interests and potential more active involvement in U3A.

### **Data analysis**

Participant profile questions and questions relating to future involvement were tallied. All responses to the eight questions (listed above) in the 'Learning in the 'third age'' section were collated and the content of responses to each question analysed.

### **Profile of participants**

The 17 questionnaires returned represented 19 members (out of 45), as two couples each returned a single questionnaire. This represents a response rate of 42%. The completed questionnaires came from 8 males and 9 females, with two leaving this question unanswered. Only one was aged under 60, 8 were in their sixties and 10 in their seventies. Only one had a first language other than English. Most (13) had been involved for three years or more, with smaller numbers indicating an involvement of one year or less (2) or two years (2), and two left the question blank. The majority (14) had attended five or more courses.

### **Responses relating to third age learning**

Participants rated the importance of keeping on learning new things as very, very important (1), very important (10) or important (3), with others commenting on reasons for learning: 'General interest. Personal development. Mental stimulation'; 'All learning broadens my outlook and gives me something to think about'; 'So I don't stagnate ... keep my brain alert'; 'To keep my mind and memory active.' One wrote:

The input of U3A knowledge is as enjoyable as it is informative and health-giving. I am soon to be 68 years old and am very aware the mind and brain have to be constantly stimulated to function at their maximum. When the mind deteriorates the body does also – they work together!

As alternative avenues for learning, discussion groups were mentioned, along with wide reading, radio and television. Several belonged to libraries. Some had attended TAFE classes in the past, and three had done distance education courses. Two used the Internet for learning. Two were involved in crafts groups. Grandchildren and other young children in a Learning Assistance Program provided educational experiences as did 'Just life'. The cost of U3A membership, \$15 for an individual and \$20 for a couple per year, compared favourably with the cost of these other activities. The cost of purchasing

books and magazines was mentioned, and initial costs for Internet access. Serious university study via Open Learning was considered beyond the budget of someone on an age pension. Other comments on these other learning opportunities included regrets about the phasing out of some enrichment courses at TAFE. 'Everything new is of interest' summed up the general openness to locally available opportunities.

While one respondent answered the question, 'What impact has U3A made in your life?' with 'Not a lot,' most responses to it were very positive: 'It has given me the confidence of knowing that anything can be pursued if one has the stamina of mind to pursue it (learning and study).' Another wrote: 'It has given me an opportunity to mix with people with similar interests and has been very good for me.' This involvement with other people and making friends was mentioned by four others. The learning opportunities were the focus of other responses: 'I think it is great. I only did Commercial course at high school.' A couple said that U3A had made their life more interesting and that it had 'given us a chance to further our education which was limited only to High School'. For another, 'It has made me aware of things forgotten or [that I've] not had the opportunity to do and knowing that you can or would be capable of achieving more in my life.'

Answers to the question, 'What have you learned about yourself and other people by attending U3A courses?' included responses relating to learning as a lifelong pursuit: 'One is never too old to learn and enjoy learning'; 'an enquiring mind can continue into older age'; 'Doesn't matter what our age we can still learn'; 'I am still learning'. As one summed it up, 'You are never too old to learn and nothing is new, as it just keeps coming around. People are always an experience, as you are never sure of what [you] get!' It was not only the ability to learn in later life, the need for it was also mentioned: 'We all need to keep our minds active and stimulated'; or as one put it: 'I found I had a deep need for information in the subjects I was interested in and it was a great satisfaction to me, to meet other people with the same needs as myself.' Not only did they learn a lot about themselves – 'I thought I knew it all. I don't'; 'That we didn't do too badly with the education received'; 'I think that I have discovered myself, and realise the things I should have done when young enough' – they also learned about 'the friendliness and the help given' and had 'met some really nice people'.

The best (or most interesting, or most important) thing learned in a U3A course was, according to some of the respondents, 'the very enjoyment of learning ... completely without distraction or anxiety'; and simply 'to keep on learning', because 'It's never too late to start learning,' and 'you are never too old to learn and that education is there for you should you seek it'. A few mentioned specific courses: computing, English history (and 'the gradual improvement in social aspects of life through the centuries') and 'a beginning understanding of geology and the universe'. A pleasant surprise was 'the informality and the number of people in attendance', including many 'intelligent and nice people'. The learning about themselves and others also rated a mention in this section: 'Tolerance of yourself and other people and respect for same.'

Participants identified the best thing about their involvement in U3A as learning itself and factors relating to learning, interacting with others and a change from usual routines. Responses included: 'It has taught me to focus my mind and really listen to what is being said'; 'Many things I would not have learned. Questions I have often wondered have been answered.' There was a flow-on effect: 'It has prompted me to



read more widely.’ The relaxed, informal nature of the classes was appreciated: ‘No pressure to perform but at the same time being able to increase your knowledge;’ ‘Lack of pressure to perform at a given level’. The social interaction was also important: ‘Meeting great people’; ‘Belonging to a class who share the same interest and enjoyment in being there;’ ‘Meeting people who spent their youth in other countries’; ‘Being with people like myself’; and ‘Learning and meeting very friendly people.’ Sharing and ‘listening to other people’s views’ was valued, and ‘Getting me out of the house’ was another thing that U3A classes achieved! The ability to be learning in the university environment was also appreciated: ‘I am again in contact with people teaching at the University of South Australia.’

Regarding future participation, the respondents commented on course topics, timings and their possible role as a teacher. Subject areas of interest for future courses were ranked in preference order as: computing, history, social issues, science, languages, health, religion. Other areas suggested were philosophy, archaeology and geology. Most popular days for classes were Tuesday, Monday, Thursday, with a few liking Wednesday, Friday and the weekend, with afternoons being much preferred to mornings, and only one willing to attend an evening class. Most gave a negative answer to the question, ‘Would you like to be involved in teaching U3A courses as well as learning?’ One participant was currently involved in teaching a class, and one other was willing but did not feel qualified.

## DISCUSSION

The discussion that follows relates both to the results of the project summarised above and to subsequent informal and interview data. The favourable comments of the participants speak for themselves of the value of U3A for them: in particular, their joy in learning new things and inspiration to keep on learning more, as well as the many social benefits they identify. Their recognition of the benefits of learning activities for health and well-being echoes Seedsman (1994) and others (Swindell, 1991; Elmore, 1999; NIACE, 2002). Such research suggests that the promotion and facilitation of access by older Australians to such activities would be a cost-effective use of government funding, locally and nationally. When a commitment to such goals is included as part of a political party’s platform (e.g., SA Labor, 2004), there is hope for continued support for lifelong learning for the entire community.

In a 2004 interview, two Whyalla U3A founding members commented on both the learning aspects (keeping their minds active) and social aspects of their participation (meeting people, and having a sense of belonging to the group), as well as simply providing an interesting pastime (Penman & Ellis, 2003), reinforcing the comments made by participants in the project described. The fact that many of the topics studied were initiated by members added to their learning experience. In some cases, health sessions run for the community (e.g. women’s and men’s health issues, medications) were presented as an outcome of requests from U3A members. Comments were also made relating to passing on what they had learned to others (related to the ‘generativity’ concept referred to earlier), and the widened access they themselves had to sources of information relating to their health and other needs.

Given the positives identified by members, it is worth speculating as to why U3A may not draw other seniors. In an informal discussion among some U3A members later in

the year of the study, reasons why others did not get involved with U3A, or why some members did not participate more, were suggested. Lack of transport was mentioned as a disincentive for some, but it was thought that this could be overcome by arranging carpooling. Some people, they felt, were so involved in other groups or activities, such as travel, quilting, croquet, that they did not have time left for U3A. The range of courses might not be such as to attract others or, with regard to areas of interest such as computing, they could feel that they knew enough already to satisfy their immediate needs. (It was pointed out that attendance does not always match expressed wishes for courses.) A Tumby Bay (southern Eyre Peninsula) resident who had been aware of the start of the U3A group there felt that it had discontinued because of people's perceptions of the term 'university' – the nomenclature had made them feel that it was not something for them. This could indicate an issue that should be addressed in other areas where U3A is operating or where people wish to start a branch. Another reason given for possible non-participation was lack of knowledge of what U3A had to offer; hence it was suggested that publicity could be improved: newspaper publicity should include photographs, and individual members who were involved in other community groups could use the opportunity to publicise U3A and its activities there.

As in other places where U3A operates, some Whyalla participants are active in helping to provide for their peers' desire to keep on learning. It is to be hoped that with increasing confidence more members will join the group of presenters instead of being only more or less passive class members. The fact that campus lecturers have at times been involved in presenting courses has been of help to the group, but could be a negative factor if it discourages members from contributing. The inclusion of classes targeting the development of course preparation and presentation skills could address this. Materials such as those produced for 'learning circles' by the Adult Learning Association can provide a useful starting point for those willing to lead a group (Adult Learning Association, 2000). The use of videos as content and discussion starters has made it easier for some members from 2002 to lead classes. In 2002, space was made available to two U3A members to join with campus staff in a Train the Trainer workshop extending over three days. The future provision of similar opportunities to join in relevant staff development sessions could help build confidence to lead.

While many members appreciate the 'no exams' aspect of U3A, there are others who have expressed interest in formal courses, but feel barred from them by fees. Whyalla Campus for many years had a one-year bridging program that enabled students without a tertiary entrance score (TER) to access degree programs. Such a study program could allow interested older students a way in to further formal studies. This has been replaced in 2006 by a University Foundation Program, and new two-year Associate Degree programs also provide a non-TER pathway to university. Perhaps seniors' scholarships of some sort could address the needs of this group, who can be regarded as another 'equity group' under-represented in higher education. (Some discussions were held in 2002 with campus management regarding the possibility of a scholarship to be offered to up to two U3A members to cover the bridging program, for which only student amenities fees were charged; this was approved but never implemented. The recent improvements to the U3A facilities have been a means of benefiting the whole group, rather than just a few.) At the same time, numbers of older people are studying at a high level in formal programs, and this is to be commended; not only are they achieving for themselves, they are also reinforcing the fact that one is never too old to contribute to the store of human knowledge (Lear, 2003; Esau, 2000, and Fewster, 2002 report on the

gaining of doctorates by two 79 year olds; and Owen-Brown, 2002, tells of a man of 92 outdoing them).

To what extent is the Whyalla U3A unique, or at least different from a metropolitan U3A group? Many of the members' needs and aspirations are likely to be similar to those of their age peers in other places. Hence, no claim is made that their motivations for being involved in U3A and their experience of that participation are fundamentally different from those of members of U3A groups in big cities. On the other hand, it is likely that the smaller numbers and the fact that many of them are also involved with other U3A members in other groups (Probus, for example) may be more characteristic of a 'country' group such as this, and may help them to get to know each other better. While transport problems were suggested as a possible reason why some people did not become involved, this is in fact likely to be less of an obstacle in a place the size of Whyalla, with people willing to give a lift to people without easy transport access; currently the U3A group does not draw people from beyond Whyalla. Costs of membership are less than metropolitan membership rates, a boon to people on fixed incomes. With a smaller population base, the availability of a wide range of experts as possible tutors for U3A courses is more limited than in larger places, and so course offerings are not so extensive. A comparative study of U3A experience in different contexts would be an interesting exercise.

Further research on the educational needs of others in the older age range in the community is desirable. A Whyalla City Council survey during 1999 (Borthwick, 2000) on perceived needs of those targeted by Home and Community Care (people with disabilities, including the frail aged) and their carers did not specifically mention educational needs. There were questions relating to leisure activities and some of the activities mentioned, such as craft and community groups, no doubt had an educative dimension. However, a survey of retired people in general concerning specific perceptions of educational needs and opportunities would give further relevant information to guide new or extended initiatives. Perhaps this is something that interested U3A members themselves could be involved in conducting.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has considered the part the University of the Third Age has played in providing accessible learning opportunities for seniors in one provincial city, helping to satisfy their thirst for knowledge. This was explored through a small project some years ago, with findings added to and updated by subsequent interview and informal data, plus participant observer insights.

The project described achieved its aims of investigating the importance for a particular group of senior Australians of continuing to learn, and discerning the impact of U3A on their lives. It also achieved its ancillary aim of finding out members' preferences and willingness to contribute more actively to the program. The positive comments by the participants demonstrated that U3A was playing an important part in their lives. Since then, the continued attendance of others and continuing positive reports has likewise shown how much their U3A participation has been valued. It has contributed to meeting both learning and social needs for many of the members, adding to their quality of life and having a transformative influence. While there has continued to be an appreciation for outside input from university staff and others, individual members have become

readier to run sessions. By taking the step of joining a group with a focus on learning, the members have found that they have access to information about other learning opportunities. Their willingness to explore new areas only increases this awareness of further possibilities.

The Whyalla U3A relationship with the local university campus, now the headquarters for the Centre for Regional Engagement (which also includes the Mount Gambier Regional Centre), is one of mutual benefit, each providing resources for the other, the campus easing the operational burdens for the U3A by providing a range of facilities, and the U3A assisting in the campus's engagement with the local community. Such cooperation can provide a model for other communities and educational institutions to learn from, in relation to both learning activities and other community needs.

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