

The Beginnings of U3A



From Toulouse

To Melbourne

*A souvenir booklet
to commemorate the
20th Anniversary of the
founding of Universities
of the Third Age
in Australia*



Contents

Overview:

Origin of the Universities of the Third Age in Victoria, 1984 -5-----	2
The Next Wave, 1985-6 -----	5
Later—A Unique Development 1991 -----	5
The Formation of U3A Network-Victoria-----	6

Personal Reminiscences:

- ‘How it all Began: From Toulouse to Melbourne’
Dr Jack McDonell -----7
- ‘The Gang of Four’ – Beginnings in Australia.
Jill Thompson -----10
- ‘A Success Story’
Ann Whyte -----12
- ‘The Unintended Consequences of Drinking Coffee’
Dr Cliff Picton -----14

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thanks to those individuals and U3As who have contributed
material for this book

An Overview -

Origin of the Universities of the Third Age in Victoria

In July 1984 a public meeting was arranged in Melbourne to gauge community interest in establishing the U3A movement in Australia. It stemmed from a far-sighted initiative by four people with professional interest in education for mature students. These were: Jack McDonell, Jill Thompson, Cliff Picton, and Ann Whyte.

Two further public meetings were held, as a result of which the **U3A City of Melbourne** was formed on 26th July, 1984 and **U3A Hawthorn** on November 13, 1984. Two more U3As followed in 1985 -- **U3A Monash** (now U3A Waverley) on February 12th and **U3A Ringwood**, on 26th March.

General interest in the idea of a University of the Third Age grew - building from a meeting of approximately 70 people in Melbourne (despite very limited preliminary advertising) - to well over 100 filling the Hawthorn Library with 109 members joining on that day. Over 350 people attended the Monash launch and over 200 were present at Ringwood.

The very first courses on offer at a U3A in Australia were at **U3A City of Melbourne** which started in March 1985. The length of the courses depended on the needs of the group and on the tutor. The majority of these courses were traditional academic subjects in the Humanities, including Art Appreciation, Clear Thinking, Current Affairs, Australian and European History, Philosophy, Literature, Music/Opera, Languages, Genealogy and Social Science Studies. Self-confidence was to be encouraged through Public Speaking. The U3A received a great deal of publicity in the daily newspapers and radio interviews and membership of this first U3A grew to 1100 within three years.

Courses also began at **U3A Hawthorn** in March 1985 with 30 classes, offering subjects such as Art Appreciation, Philosophy, Australian History, Nutrition & Health, Current Affairs, Relaxation, Languages, Marine Biology, Comparative Religion, Car Maintenance, Music Appreciation, Anthropology, Economics, Computers and Social Ethics.

Records indicate that between March 1985 and July 1986 there were 67 general courses. In 1989 eleven of these courses were still operating and 13 of the original tutors were still teaching. In 1986 the first 'Social Forum' was held. This was to develop into the highly popular Saturday Series, a series of lectures by academics and experts in various fields of human endeavour. A further development was a Summer School, the first of which was held in 1997 and offered a pot-pourri of lectures.

In 1988 a report called *'The First Four Years'* was published recording the achievements and objectives of that period. Two further four yearly reports have been published: *'Learning for Living'* in 1989-1992, and *'Living and Learning'* in 1993-1996. U3A Hawthorn has grown from the initial membership of 109 in 1985 to over 1100 in 2003, offering 87 full year courses and 37 short courses.

Courses began at **U3A Monash** in April 1985. The first newsletter to members in March 1985 announced the commencement of the following classes: Art Appreciation, British History, Computers, Creative Writing, Current Affairs, Current International Affairs, Literature, Eastern Philosophy, Practical Art and Public Speaking. There was also an invitation to interested people to meet to discuss the formation of a group with the somewhat ambitious title 'Rational Thinking: The Psychology of Mathematical Lateral Thinking and the Metaphor'. Two other possible groups were advertised 'Ageism' and 'Japanese Studies'. While these proposals indicate the breadth of thinking about the potential of U3A Monash, there is no evidence that these three groups actually eventuated.

The next major event in 1985 was the first general meeting of U3A Monash on 19th August. A report from the Policy Committee, from that meeting, did not give a figure for current membership but did say that 30 courses had been commenced in the first six months.

The main business of the meeting was described as: '...reviewing the operations of U3A Monash to date, and considering a document which, for the first time, would set out the aims, guiding principles and organisational details of the group and also to elect such office-bearers and committee members as needed.' The document referred to was a 'Draft Charter' for the U3A. Its adoption was the first step towards the later process of incorporation.

U3A Ringwood—Approximately 200 people were present at a public meeting called by the Ringwood City Council on 26th March, 1984 at the Ringwood Cultural Centre. This was chaired by the Mayor, Councillor Gardini and guest speakers were Cliff Picton (COTA) and Dr Jack McDonell (Monash University).

Further meetings followed - an interim steering committee and then a committee of management were formed. The first classes started on 17th June and the following subjects were offered: English Literature, Poetry, Craft, Play Reading, British History, Photography, and Arm-Chair Travel. Some time later Psychology and Philosophy were added. U3A Ringwood started with 44 members and by November this had risen to 120, with additional subjects offered in Computers, Public Speaking, Mixed Antiquities, Music Appreciation and Art.

U3A Ringwood is unique, being the first local government sponsored U3A in Australia. Ringwood was also instrumental in spreading the U3A message to many regional areas of Victoria and to other States of Australia, with representatives attending meetings in the ACT (Canberra) and in Western Australia.



From these original four U3As, the U3A organisation has become the fastest growing educational movement in Australia. There are 72 groups across Victoria, with over 18,000 individual members. In addition there are now a number of new groups in formation.

THE NEXT WAVE

Our anniversary celebrations are linked to the year in which classes actually commenced in individual U3As. The histories of the first four U3As are outlined in the preceding pages. Following hard on their heels four others started classes in the following year. This next wave were officially formed in 1985, but classes did not commence until 1986. The following list gives the names (and the then addresses) of these U3A campuses that were operating by the end of 1986:

U3A Frankston/Peninsula

C/- Division of Continued Education
Chisholm Institute of Technology, Frankston

U3A Geelong

C/- Gordon Technical College, Geelong

U3A Portland

C/- Portland Continuing Education Centre, Portland

U3A Yarra Valley

View Bank

It is interesting to note that the initial links to tertiary institutions, established by Frankston and Geelong, have continued. Unfortunately Portland is no longer operating, but the others have grown and are flourishing.

LATER - A UNIQUE DEVELOPMENT.

The only U3A specifically for people with sensory loss - U3A **Kooyong** began in 1991 under the auspices of the **Vision Australia Foundation**. A group of people with sensory loss lobbied hard to have a U3A established there to expand the services offered to those with impaired sight. Today they have 89 members, who can study a range of subjects including both French, Italian, Art, Philosophy, History and Science. This initiative is unique in Australia. Mary Longman (deceased), Laurie Coles, Barbara Rautman and Dr John Alexander are to be complimented for their foresight in looking for ways to lessen the impact of sensory loss.

INFORMAL NETWORKING

From the beginning there was an informal network among these first U3As. At this stage this network group consisted of representatives from all of the four U3As, working together to answer the many enquiries about joining a U3A, or forming another one. This U3A Group put together a 'Starter Kit' which was a collective ideas booklet based on their own experiences. In addition the very first U3A Network Newsletter was produced at Ringwood.

Despite being geographically separated these U3As came together for shared activities. Bushwalking was one of these, and with some changes to the composition of the group, continues to this day.

U3A NETWORK - VICTORIA INC.

By 1988 the number of U3As had grown and some of these saw the need to create a formal network. The central role of this new group was to promote the U3A movement generally and also to:

- foster the creation of new U3As -
- support the further development of existing U3As
- serve as a reference body and a resource facility for all U3As
- provide publicity, promotion and profile for the U3A movement generally - to member U3As, to the general public, and to government and other public bodies.

Since it began U3A Network has been represented on several bodies including the ACFE Board and the ACFE Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council; Adult Learning Australia; Senior Citizens Week Advisory Committee and Australian Coalition '99 Victoria.

There has also been a member of the U3A Network Executive on the COTA Policy Council for a number of years - and this is one of those early links that still exists. The Universities of the Third Age and the Council on the Ageing have different jobs to do, but both recognise the role and capacity of older people in our community. The U3A movement demonstrates this perfectly.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN: “FROM TOULOUSE TO MELBOURNE”



Jack McDonell

The birthplace of the University of the Third Age movement was Toulouse, in France. There, in 1972, Pierre Vellas, Professor of Political Economy, organised a summer school for retired persons. As one writer has said¹, “like all actors in human history, and the more so all pioneers and innovators, Vellas did not know what he was doing”. When the school ended the enthusiasm and determination of the participants was such that, instead of preparing a repeat for the next summer, Vellas was forced to launch another program for the forthcoming academic year. Soon similar undertakings mushroomed in France and abroad, and a first international colloquium on the new concept was held in Toulouse as early as May 1973.

By early 1975 there were U3A-type programs on the way in Belgium, Switzerland, Poland, Italy, Spain, the USA and Quebec in Canada; and the International Association of Universities of the Third Age (IAUTA) had been founded. The dominant model for U3A programs was one which rested upon contributions from university people. Indeed the French national association and the IAUTA both adopted the principle that each member U3A should have a direct link with a recognised and established university. This was seen as desirable in order to preserve the credibility of the label ‘University’.

The beginnings of the movement in the United Kingdom came a little later. Prior to 1982 a few small U3As had started but the main impetus came from the launch, at Easter that year, of the University of the Third Age at Cambridge. The importance of this event was the deliberated change in the model for U3A programming which it introduced. The founding of this U3A was heavily influenced by the backgrounds and attitudes of its three main founders. These were Peter Laslett, Michael Young (Lord Young) and Eric Midwinter.

Dr Peter Laslett, Fellow of Trinity College Cambridge had long experience with the BBC and had been one of the founders of the Open University. He had become concerned about the issue of education for the elderly in Great Britain and was wont to assert that 'the British over 60 are the least educated community of native English speakers in the world'. He proposed a charter of five educational rights for older persons, which may be summarised as:

- A fair share of the educational budget
- Education isn't just for youth
- Access to all institutions *on their (the elderly's) own terms*
- A national 'distance teaching' organization for the elderly
- Recognition of the cultural and intellectual importance of the elderly.

Michael Young had been the founder of the Consumer Association, first chairman of the National Consumer Council, another originator of the Open University, president of the National Extension College and chairman of the Mutual Aid Centre. Eric Midwinter was the director of the Centre for Policy and Ageing (akin to the COTA in Australia), a social historian, educationist and a well-known writer, broadcaster and consumer champion.

Given the backgrounds of these three men, it is not surprising that their vision of Universities of the Third Age in the UK was one in which control should be firmly in the hands of the Third Agers themselves, as distinct from the French model which was about older people negotiating a contract for services from an academic agency. To quote Midwinter, 'our philosophy was based on the sound concept that cooperative, self-motivated learning was in many respects a more effective method than the one customarily applied in schools and colleges.'²

This founding U3A was to be guided by a set of principles enunciated by Peter Laslett.³ The following abbreviated form of the first few of these 19 Principles indicates their general thrust

1. The university shall consist of a body or persons who undertake to learn and to help others to learn. Those who teach shall also learn and those who learn shall also teach.
2. No qualifications shall be required, and no judgement made by the university between applicants.
3. No salary or fee shall be paid to any member for teaching other members
4. All members of the university shall be expected to offer voluntary service to it and to its activities.
5. The curriculum of the university shall be as wide as resources permit, ...and so on for another 14 items.

The almost evangelical tone of these 19 Principles indicates the strength of feeling of the founders of this 'UK model' of U3As for the creation of this fully democratic version of a U3A, run entirely by its members. In later years Laslett, in conversation with the writer, wondered whether these principles should be reviewed. He rather felt that they had acquired a status like that of the Ten Commandments – 'everyone subscribes to them and no-one literally follows them'!

In reviewing this model in 1984⁴ Midwinter identifies four 'peculiarly English' characteristics:

- A somewhat portentous title
- A refusal to be overly theoretical about its structure
- A stern determination to be independent
- An air of suspicion about the infallibility of authority

In 1984, four colleagues in Melbourne, each of whom had been observing, from their own perspectives, the development of the U3A movement, agreed to sound out the local level of interest in such a concept. The four were Cliff Picton, CEO of COTA, Jill Thompson, Secretary of the Adult Education Association, Ann Whyte, a senior staff member of the CAE and the writer, who was then the Director of the Centre for Continuing Education at Monash University.

They came to the conclusion that of the two existing models (French and UK) the UK model was the more practical one for Australia. A public meeting was organised and modestly promoted. Over 60 people turned up and the U3A concept, in terms of the UK model, was explained to them. The meeting was enthusiastic in its support for setting up a trial U3A along the lines of those in the UK. A large number of potential members provisionally 'enrolled' and some volunteered to form a planning committee. And so the foundations of what is now the City of Melbourne U3A, the first in Australia, were laid. These beginnings led to the growth of a 'U3A movement' which swept across Victoria and the rest of Australia in a very short time. It was a movement 'whose time had come'.

Jack McDonell, Nov. 2004

1. Michel Philibert in *Mutual Aid Universities*, Eric Midwinter (Ed), Croom Helm 1984.

2. Eric Midwinter, *Happy Anniversary*, June 2003 article posted on http://www.elderhostel.org/ein/anniversary_u3a.asp

3. Peter Laslett, *A Fresh Map of Life – The Emergence of the Third Age*, Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1989

4. Eric Midwinter in *Mutual Aid Universities*.

“THE GANG OF FOUR” -- BEGINNINGS IN AUSTRALIA



Jill Thompson

Jack has written about the beginnings of the idea of learning in older age in Europe - and particularly how it evolved in England. In Australia there seemed to be sudden simultaneous flowerings of the idea in Melbourne. From my recollection, Jack and Ann Whyte were the first, and Cliff and myself quickly took up the idea.

Jack remembers meetings over coffee in Glenferrie Road, Hawthorn in early 1984. I recall the four of us planning in his office at Monash. You will have to forgive us for gaps in the memories after 20 years. But there were a number of meetings. Inevitably, however, in the end, talking was not enough. How to get this idea out there? How to start? Where to start?

We settled on a public meeting in answer to the 'how'. I was working with the Adult Education Association at the time (located within the CAE). I figured I could find a venue there, as they had always been generous and supportive of adult learning in all its forms. I think CAE also offered an advertisement in their course brochure, which had a very wide spread into households in Melbourne and across Victoria. We organised the Conference Centre and waited to be deluged with acceptances. But people took their time-only about 40 responded, but we felt that would at least be a good beginning. On the actual day, over one hundred arrived!

We exchanged ideas and formulated the basic principles:

- all voluntary work, both administrative and tutorial
- low fees so anyone could join
- accommodation under the auspice of an educational institution if possible (the idea of 'user pays' hadn't yet arrived)
- members aged 50+. It was targeted at people in retirement, in

recognition that we do not stop living when we stop earning, and the accumulated wisdom and learning of people in retirement could be shared for everybody's benefit.

The really interesting thing about the meeting was the mood. After Jack, Ann, Cliff and I had had our rap, and asked for questions, the energy and enthusiasm of the group was palpable. There were people there that day who signed up immediately to help get it going. They became the first management committee. There were those who were quite impatient at the idea of waiting from July to early the following year to start. They wanted to start NOW.

Then Tony Delves (CEO of the CAE at that time) said the CAE would back our ideas, and would make the future of the campus in the city assured by offering accommodation free of charge. The AEA helped by allowing the office to be used for their own organisation as well as the fledgling U3A.

The rest of the story is not mine alone to tell. Many people worked to make the launch of the first campus at the CAE successful. Several people who attended that first meeting 20 years ago are still involved with the U3A at the City campus. They are the real heroes, and the bearers of the history of the organisation.

By January 1985 the City Campus had advertised its intention to commence in the February. There were over 100 members. I went for a holiday over January, more than a little anxious because at that time we didn't have a single tutor, and therefore a course, organised. But on my return there was a sudden surge. My recollection is that we started with either 11 or 17 courses. It was amazing.

There was a wonderful range of courses on offer, which completely vindicated our beliefs in the capacities of people in retirement. As I recall, we had Literature, Australian and Ancient History, a number of languages, Comparative Religion and Current Affairs. There were more, but how exciting to see this choice when we opened the door!

In the meantime, at the Hawthorn Community Education Project, a second public meeting had been held, and that campus was getting organised. And at Monash Jack was also setting up a campus under the auspice of the Extended Education Centre.

By the end of the first year we felt confident enough to plan a U3A Conference and one or two members still have the program.

Ann knew Davis McCaughie, so he was invited as the keynote speaker. Wonderful man. So wonderful that before our conference the government of the day appointed him Governor. We thought this was the end of our keynote speaker. But no, his first official duty as Governor of Victoria was opening the U3A Conference.

For me it is a wonderful experience to see, 20 years later, how strong and dynamic the U3A organisation is. I hope it is blessed to go on for another 20 years.

A SUCCESS STORY



Ann Whyte*

The success of the U3A movement in Australia continues to delight me and I remain honoured to have been associated with its inception. Today in Woollahra you can study languages at various levels, current affairs, writing, history, music, architecture and the Harbour to name a few topics – an irresistible range.

My main memories of the early days are

- The inspirational nature of Eric Midwinter's work in the UK
- The willingness of key sponsors such as Roy Longworth at

- The importance of creating multiple pilot U3As simultaneously
- The need for a national auspice, the Australian Council on the Ageing, to foster the spread of U3As nationally
- The willing collegiality of the gang of four; Cliff Picton, Jill Thompson, Jack McDonell and myself
- And the endless talent, humour and experience available through the U3A-ers.

To this day some of the design principles that mattered then remain at the forefront of my mind. We wanted the movement to be able to grow so we wanted a simple, democratic structure, independence from funding and minimal rules. I remember the raised eyebrows when the Hawthorn campus, at that time deeply immersed in courses on Cell Biology and Advanced Latin, became aware that in Portland, with a membership of 30, most members attended most classes. Relevance and participation were vital for success and they can only be determined locally.

The original volunteers at Hawthorn included a school principal, many teachers, a scientist, an accountant, a nurse, a builder, people from the business sector and Australia's first woman wool classer. They shared a commitment to democratic process and common sense that accommodated great variety. This helped because in Hawthorn they co-existed in a small Victorian cottage with the Community Education Group, the Alternative Education Resources Group and Learning for the Less Mobile – a heady mix of idealists bound by their love of education.

Interestingly people who were third agers in the 1980s are typically givers, they support their children, often share their homes and many contribute as volunteers. I'm sure this attitude towards life assisted in the early days of the U3A and created the inclusive and generous culture that characterises the movement.

Ann Whyte, March 2005

*This delightfully informal photograph of Ann was taken whilst she was on an *Earthwatch* excursion.

THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF DRINKING COFFEE



Cliff Picton

Sometimes important things develop from the most unlikely situations. The U3A movement in Australia is one such instance. In an act of serendipity the four co-founders – Jill, Ann, Jack and I found ourselves drinking coffee together at a gerontology conference in Melbourne over 20 years ago. Each of us, independently, had had recent contact with the developing U3A movement in Europe. I had given a paper at a conference in Grenoble, France and had met Professor Michel Philibert, a leader of the French movement and Professor Brian Groombridge of the recently-founded U3A at the University of London.

We were enthusiastic about this intriguing adult education development that seemed to offer an opportunity to address the neglect of the educational needs and aspirations of older Australians. We decided, rather rashly, to call a public meeting on a Saturday in the middle of the football season to see if there was any interest. Our only advertising was a small insert in the Adult Education Association Newsletter that was about to be published.

On the day, the venue (the CAE Centre in Melbourne) was filled to capacity. Each of us spoke about a particular aspect of U3A and then asked for comments and questions. It quickly became clear that the notion of a self-managed education program for and by older people had struck a chord. An interim committee of volunteers was formed to develop a plan of action. Within a short time this resulted in the

establishment of the first U3A in Australia – the City U3A, soon followed by Hawthorn, Monash and Ringwood.

The early days were characterised by great enthusiasm and innovation. There was no shortage of volunteers and it was clear that the members represented a rich resource capable of managing all the tasks entailed in developing a wide variety of educational offerings. From the outset the four ‘midwives’ as we became known, had stressed the need to affirm the ability of older people to determine what they wanted to learn and how they wished to organise themselves. Members warmed to this notion as a way of countering the negative stereotype of ageing as a time of physical and intellectual decline. Similarly they responded positively to develop a mode of learning uniquely adapted to the needs and circumstances of older people.

Development—The movement spread rapidly throughout Victoria. As new groups were formed it was thought desirable to have a forum in which ideas about development, organization, policy etc., might be discussed. Thus the Network Committee was founded and I was invited to become the first Chairman. Meetings were held at the offices of the Australian Council on the Ageing.

Two interesting incidents stick in the mind from those early years. One was the letter we wrote to the then Minister for Education Senator Susan Ryan telling her about the birth of U3A. After waiting for three months we got a reply that warned us about the need to be careful as the use of the word ‘university’ was legally protected – no word of congratulations! The second was the grant of \$50,000 from the Bicentennial authority that we used to put on a Conference that led to our first contact with the movement in China. Interestingly there was some lively debate as to whether the U3A movement should accept government money because of the fear of strings being attached.

Gradually the ‘good news’ about U3A spread beyond Victoria. Soon all states had U3As in both metropolitan and rural areas. We now mark the twentieth anniversary, with no indication that the U3A spirit is flagging.

Governments have woken up to the importance of older voters and

this has resulted in some financial support. Perhaps more significantly U3A is now routinely invited to participate in government committees looking into adult education.

A more disturbing development is the way in which public liability insurance has cast its shadow over some U3A activities as it has in a wide range of community groups.

As befits the growth of technology in our lives U3A has responded with the development of **U3A Online**, a flourishing program that links members in Australia with their counterparts internationally.

The Benefits of U3A—After more than twenty years experience what do we know about the benefits of the movement? Research is showing clearly that people who remain physically and intellectually active enjoy benefits to their physical and mental health. Social and friendship networks reduce tendencies to social isolation and loneliness that can accompany ageing. Recognition that there is no end to intellectual curiosity gives some people an added purpose to their lives. Last but not least having an ageing population more focussed on positive living promotes social cohesion and saves the community money.

The Challenges of U3A—While much has been achieved in our first two decades we should not become complacent. There are many potential members who have not heard about U3A and, in general, it is not attracting people from non-English speaking backgrounds. Clearly we need to reach out to people from different cultures and those who feel left out and alienated from mainstream society. I believe that U3A members worldwide could do much to help promote peace and understanding between peoples. U3As represent an unacknowledged element of civil society.

In all of this we need to safeguard the independence of U3A. In my view it should always be first and foremost about local people making local decisions to suit local conditions.

We, the lucky ones, heard the good news when the first U3A was founded in France in the 1970s. Let us all work to make sure that the broadcast is heard over and over again by our ever-widening audience.

Cliff Picton. 2005

Compiled by
U3A Network-Victoria Inc.
Editing by Judy Hall and Alison Carlson.
Artwork and Design by Sheila Collins

U3A today caters for a diversity of interests, both physical and mental, thus embodying the idea of life-long learning, and provides, at the same time, a vibrant, social network that is an important facet in the lives of many Third Age people.



U3A Network-Victoria wishes to thank the Adult, Community and Further Education Board and the Office of Senior Victorians for the funding received, thus enabling the celebration of the 20th birthday of the University of the Third Age in Victoria.

