

THE U3A STORY

The beginning

In 1981, Cambridge University academic Peter Laslett hosted a conference in Cambridge to discuss the possibility of bringing the U3A to Britain. The conference attracted the social entrepreneur Michael Young, whose many initiatives include the Consumers Association and the Open University. It also produced an invitation from the BBC for Eric Midwinter, director of the Centre for Policy on Ageing, to be interviewed on the radio programme *You and Yours* on July 22 1981. That short interview was the first chance anyone outside a small circle of educationalists had to hear about the U3A, and it brought an avalanche of 400 letters.

It was suddenly obvious that the U3A was an idea whose time had come. The emerging U3A needed quickly to lay its hands on some money and a place to operate from, and to reply to all those letters. Dianne Norton from Age Concern offered the spare room in her Wimbledon home and dealt with the letters, except those from London which were handled by Brian Groombridge, professor of adult education at London University. The Nuffield Foundation put up most of the money - a grant of £9,000. Christian and Voluntary Service gave a similar grant to the London U3A.

Peter Laslett wrote the objects and principles of the U3A. He firmly rejected the French model – the French *Universite du Troisieme Age* had started in 1972 - in which the local U3A was guided by the local university. Laslett wanted groups of people to get together to learn what interested them, and they would have, not a teacher, but a group leader or convenor, who could co-ordinate and help guide their efforts. The U3A should not be dependent on public funds. He believed state funding would be tied to state policy.

A series of planning meetings in Laslett's rooms in Trinity College led to an experimental Easter School at St John's College, Cambridge in March 1982; and this in turn led to the creation of the first U3A, in Cambridge. It also produced a national committee. Michael Young was chairman and Eric Midwinter general secretary. The third committee member was Peter Laslett, and Dianne Norton was executive secretary and the U3A's only employee.

The committee took its first decisions in Michael Young's car as it took the four from Cambridge to London at the end of the Easter School. After paying the Easter School expenses they had £6400 of the Nuffield Foundation's £10,000 left, and they decided to split it in two. £3200 would go to creating the national base, and £3200 to the emerging Cambridge U3A.

Local U3As, they decided, were to be self-governing, and open to all Third Agers; their purpose must be educational in its widest sense, which meant that "educational" embraced including leisure pursuits and social purposes; and they must be democratically run.

How the U3A Began

The University of the Third Age, now more popularly known as U3A, began in Toulouse, France, in 1972 as a summer school for retired people. It was so successful that other World War 'baby boomer' generation increasingly coming on board, U3A can ensure that decision makers hear the views of third and fourth-agers – and act on them. Programmes were quickly set up throughout France and the idea spread throughout the world. The first International Association of U3As was established in 1980. The organisation was set up in Britain in 1982.

While U3A is celebrated for the wide range of activities it offers to retired people, providing socialisation and stimulation, it is the human stories of the members which make it the very vibrant organisation it has become.

When families grow up and work comes to an end, finding like-minded people and new challenges can be a problem – but not if you have an active U3A group in your district! Many people have also found U3A a lifeboat when partners have died, divorce has fractured their lives, or other tragic life events have occurred. The positive attitude of the members and their group leaders and the support and companionship they offer, has transformed many lives and encouraged members to have more fulfilment in retirement than they could have imagined.

The U3A is also a body which speaks for older people on national issues and keeps its members well informed on matters which affect their daily lives. With the post -Second World War 'baby boomer' generation increasingly coming on board, U3A can ensure that decision makers hear the views of third and fourth-agers – and act on them.

The first U3As

Quite quickly, there were three big U3As. Cambridge U3A had a £20 annual fee, hundreds of members, and scores of interest groups. London was doing just as well, with a much smaller annual fee – just £4 – and a weekly Monday lecture. And Huddersfield had support from the local authority, hundreds of members, and a weekly dance.

The word spread fast. Often the national committee was contacted by a lone enthusiast, who would be advised to bring in a few others, enough for a small ad hoc committee. They were told to arrange an inaugural meeting and spread the word through the local press and radio and with posters in civic outlets, especially libraries.

Two early U3As started in Hertfordshire in 1983: Stevenage and Harpenden. In Somerset, a U3A in Yeovil affiliated to the national organisation on 22 October 1983. 1983 also saw the first U3A in Essex, at Saffron Walden. The first U3A in the London area apart from London U3A itself also started in 1983, in Merton. Devon was another early county, with Totnes and Barnstaple moving first.

The first national U3A magazine appeared in September 1983. Its first issue was called *The Last Post*, a title which caused an instant outcry. The second issue in February 1984 was called *Late Extra*, and in summer 1984 a name was found that lasted for a while: *Third Age*. In October 1983, the U3A's national organisation was registered as a charity called *The Third Age Trust*. Some grants came in during the year: £4300 from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, £2400 from the National Extension College, and the Nuffield Foundation gave £5,000 to support a national organiser for two years.

By then, eight U3As were officially registered with the national office, and 15 more registered between October 1983 and October 1984. They all still exist.

In Surrey, Oxfordshire and Cornwall, there were organisations doing similar work. In Surrey and Oxfordshire, after some hesitation, they affiliated to the national organisation, but those in Cornwall did not come in until 2002.

A national organisation

Fifteen U3As turned up to the first national U3A conference, at Keele University, and the first of many controversies surfaced when Huddersfield and Bradford U3As moved a motion for a minimum age of 50. Young, Laslett and Midwinter were horrified and managed to get it defeated. Roy Shaw, director general of the Arts Council (and former head of Keele's extramural department) delivered the first third age lecture. Michael Young and Eric Midwinter were confirmed as chairman and general secretary, and a committee was elected.

But there had to be a long-term solution to the problem of money, or there would in time be no central organisation to help set up U3As, service them, provide them with advice and materials. An attempt to get U3As to hand over money voluntarily raised just £142.

By the time the 1985 national conference met at Ruskin Hall, Oxford, there was virtually no money left. It decided to seek some public money, without strings. The next year saw Eric Midwinter and Dianne Norton going to the Department of Education and Science (DES) and asking for help during the U3A's rocky introductory years, making it clear that they did not expect a regular subvention.

The DES coughed up £14,900 over 3 ½ years for the national office, the magazine, and the development of new U3As. The 1986 conference in Sheffield decided on a membership fee for local U3As. Michael Young stepped down as chairman and Frank Pedley, a distinguished educationalist, was elected to replace him.

The year of the Sheffield conference was also the year Sheffield got its own U3A, now the biggest in the land. A very different sort of town, Bath, also saw its U3A formed in 1986, and it fell to Bath to host the 1987 national conference, where the system of affiliation fees came under attack.

The split

The plan agreed at Sheffield meant that all U3As with more than 100 members paid £50, whether they had 100 members or 1,000 or more. Smaller U3As thought it unfair, and a per capita fee of £1 per member was agreed at the next conference, at Lancaster in 1988. It meant a huge hike for big U3As, which could find themselves paying £1,000 instead of £50.

This debate coincided with chairman Frank Pedley's proposal for a constitution for the national organisation, which gave rise to unfounded fears that the centre wanted to start controlling what individual U3As did.

Margaret Hollis of Bradford U3A called a meeting of dissident U3As. She wanted to bring to the 1987 Lancaster conference a proposal to close the national office, and substitute a new and looser federation. Frank Pedley got to hear of Hollis's proposed meeting and rang her and asked if he could attend. She agreed reluctantly, and Pedley managed to persuade them to abandon the proposal, promising that there would be a radical overhaul of the organisation.

Pedley stepped down as chairman to chair a constitutional committee, which drew up a draft for discussion at an emergency general meeting, to be held in Birmingham in June 1989. His constitution was adopted. There was to be an enlarged and restructured national committee, and additional elected posts of secretary and treasurer. The constitution detailed the number of representatives that each U3A could have for voting purposes at the AGM.

But none of this came without a cost, and it was a heavy one. In 1988 and 1989, nine U3As disaffiliated. Some of them simply collapsed, but four stormed out in anger.

Three of these were in Yorkshire: Halifax, Huddersfield and Dewsbury. The fourth was Cambridge, Britain's first U3A. They thought they were being asked to pay more to the national office than it was worth to them. Cambridge and Huddersfield were the two biggest and wealthiest U3As in the country apart from London. They also disliked the new constitution, feeling that it placed too much emphasis on a central organisation.

The split meant the loss of a third of the membership and a third of the potential income. But Bradford, which had first raised concerns, stayed in the national organisation. And, crucially, London stayed. London U3A could have made the same financial case as Huddersfield or Cambridge. It was flourishing, big, and well run. Its departure might have been a terminal blow for the national organisation. London U3A stuck by its founding objects and principles, which included encouraging and helping U3As elsewhere.

The organisation had survived. And the next year, 1988, the U3A was able at last to give Dianne Norton her spare room back. The national office rented a room in the office of the British Association of Settlements and Social Action in south London.

Looking outwards

In 1989 Jean Thompson, who had founded a languages network within the U3A, became the first subject network co-ordinator. That year saw another innovation: the first residential weekend workshop.

The national office moved again, to new premises in Stockwell Green, south London. And Eric Midwinter obtained a Rank Fellowship for someone "to promote and develop localised and autonomous U3A groups throughout Great Britain." Audrey Cloet, who four years earlier had founded Bath U3A, was appointed to the Fellowship. During her three-year stint, new U3As were established at the rate of one a fortnight.

Two hundred members from 100 U3As came to the 1991 conference in York, the biggest so far. The per capital affiliation fee was raised from £1 to £1.25 a head. By 1992, Jean Thompson was chairman, and travelled to the Netherlands for the AIUTA conference. The idea of U3As surviving more or less entirely on self-directed learning was a very strange one to most of the delegates, who had been brought up with the French U3A model and were attached to the idea of partnership with universities.

Jean Thompson explained the British model carefully, and the very next year brought a visit to Britain from the general secretary of AIUTA, bearing a personal invitation for Thompson to join the AIUTA governing board as the British representative. And at last, under Thompson's influence, the British U3A did join AIUTA, paying £1,000 a year affiliation.

Making it all work

1992 saw the first ever National Learners Week organised by NIACE, the Adult learners' organisation. In several U3As, tenth anniversary events doubled as celebrations of National Learners Week. And 1993 was the European Year of Older People, which the U3A was well placed to take full advantage of, since it had the internationalist and linguist Jean Thompson at its head.

Travel company Saga was approached for a grant to pay for a full time chief executive. They refused, but offered instead to take over publication of Third Age News for two years. Delegates at the Lancaster conference worried about what it would mean for control of the magazine – Saga intended to appoint the editor - but they accepted it.

London U3A was so upset by this decision that there was talk of breaking off from the national organisation. Out of this controversy came the Greater London Regional Forum (GLRF,) bringing in the smaller U3As in and around the capital. GLRF organises sharing of ideas as well as concerts and workshops. It has also run expansion schemes in minority ethnic areas like Haringey and helps set up regional networks elsewhere.

An application for lottery funding produced a grant of £281,965 over three years. The Resource Centre it helped create is a growing collection of non-book materials, slides, videocassettes, audiocassettes, CD Roms and other materials, freely available to U3A members. Chartered librarian Elizabeth Gibson was appointed to run it.

In 1995 the Gulbenkian Foundation provided £10,000 for development in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, where U3A penetration was not great.

There were 15 U3As in Wales, mostly in South Wales, with a total membership of 1800. The biggest and oldest was Swansea, founded in 1988. Gulbenkian money enabled Wales to build up more U3As, including Porthcawl and Carmarthen.

Scotland had seven U3As with a total of just 500 members. Local community education bodies helped create more, with the help of Scotland's biggest U3A, Edinburgh, founded in 1989. In Northern Ireland there was only the 300-strong Foyle U3A in Londonderry, and the Gulbenkian money helped Foyle to get others off the ground.

The first full time company secretary and national administrator, Lin Jonas, was appointed in 1996, and the National Office moved from Stockwell to 26 Harrison Street, off Grays Inn Road in central London. 1996 also saw two educational innovations: the first week long Summer University, at the University of Surrey in Guildford, and the Standing Committee for Education (SCE), set up to make recommendations to the NEC about educational policy and help U3As in educational work.

The lottery grants also provided an associated publication: Sources, which started in 1988. It appears three times a year, and each issue concentrates on one subject or activity. And the grant enabled the national U3A magazine, now renamed U3A News, to survive the end of the Saga sponsorship after 1999.

Looking to expand

New chairman Len Street, a former FE collage principal, began regular contacts with government. In 1998 Street arranged meetings with Kim Howells, parliamentary under-secretary at education, about lifelong learning; and with John Denham, social security minister, about a strategy for older

people. A scientist, Street also began the annual Royal Institution lecture, when some of Britain's most distinguished scientists talk about subjects of interest to U3A members.

In 2001, a grant from the Department for Education and Skills enabled the U3A to conduct a mapping exercise and find out what brought people in. It found that the average age of U3A members was 70.6 years. Just 6% were under 60, 15% were 60-64, 24% were 65-69, 25% were 70-74, 17% were 75-79, and 13% were over 80. The over-80s were a group which the U3A wanted to cater for more effectively, and Jean Thompson edited, for publication by the U3A, a collection of their views called *A voice not heard before*.

Women vastly outnumbered men. Almost three quarters of the members – 74% - were women, and only just over a quarter – 26% - were men.

It was still a largely middle class membership. The occupational breakdown was 40% professional, 15% managerial, 15% administrative, 4% technical, and just 4% manual, with 5% having had occasional or no employment. Most - 84% - had some form of occupational or private pension.

The U3A had a low public profile for its size – almost no one learned about it first from the national media. 73% of the members had become aware of the U3A by word of mouth, and 11% from the library and the local press. Many of them – 29% - had joined mainly for social contact and 14% to acquire knowledge. Another 12% wanted to acquire new skills, and 10% joined to meet people with similar interests. Another 10% joined to keep the mind active. 55% gave social contact and companionship as the aspect they most enjoyed.

In 2001 some technologically literate members started the useful electronic bulletin *Signposts*, which to this day draws attention to a host of useful learning resources to be found on the internet. The next year saw the start of the Shared Learning Projects, beginning with one at the British Museum in London. These are projects which involve research and have a specific, realistic goal.

Simmering discontent with the third age international AIUTA came to a head at the 2002 conference in Exeter where Jean Thompson, the former chairman who had taken U3A into AIUTA more than a decade earlier, made a triumphant return to argue passionately and persuasively that it would be foolish and insular for Britain to leave. She undertook that AIUTA would in future be less dominated by the French model, and the conference agreed to give it a chance.

Steady growth

In 2004 the national office moved out of central London to Bromley, where office rents are far lower. And in 2004, Dianne Norton's Third Age Press – the book publishing company she had set up after Saga took over U3A News - published Eric Midwinter's history of the U3A, called *500 Beacons* because it celebrated the first 500 U3As affiliated to the Third Age Trust.

The U3A was still expanding - fast everywhere, but fastest, according to a survey by Mike Long, in Crewe and Nantwich U3A, which had grown by a third in 2003. A DfES grant enabled researcher Pam King to find out a great deal about what U3As did. The most popular activity was walking and rambling, with music appreciation a close second, but there were a host of sometimes arcane minority subjects. She discovered groups devoted to Northumbrian pipe making, inshore navigation, and surveying the local town's best eating places. There were 570 U3As in Britain with 152,997 members and 13,500 study and activity groups, an average of 25 groups in each U3A.

At the 2006 conference at Chester in 2006, chairman Keith Richards was succeeded by Jean Goodeve from Pembrokeshire U3A, who had been both treasurer and vice chairman, and whose husband Graham had been the long-standing honorary secretary. A few weeks after the conference, former U3A vice chairman Stan Millar, previously a French teacher and school inspector, became the first AIUTA president whose first language was not French.

On Friday December 1, 2006 a huge fire, caused by an electrical fault, destroyed much of the national office, taking many of the organisation's records and much of the resource zone. But good staff work meant that the organisation's work hardly missed a beat.

The next year the U3A and the Open University signed an agreement to work together "to open up wider models of learning and to promote educational opportunity and social justice," and OU pro vice chancellor Professor David Vincent was the keynote speaker at the 2007 conference in Falmouth, Cornwall, the 25th anniversary conference.

That year the constitution was changed so that members of the executive were elected by the regions they represent, rather than by the AGM; and their geographical areas were replaced by nine English regions (following the government's boundaries) plus the three countries of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

What next?

The 2008 conference in Swansea agreed the first increase in the capitation fee for eight years. In early 2009 the new Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, led by the U3A's old friend John Denham, published a White Paper called The Learning Revolution, aimed at removing the idea that learning was for schooldays and replacing it with the concept of lifelong learning.

A new chairman, former teacher Ian Searle from Carrick U3A in Cornwall, replaced Jean Goodeve at the Edinburgh conference in 2009. The U3A was by now a player in the national education debate, and was about to embark on a media operation designed both to raise its profile and to make its voice heard more widely. Treasurer Terry Hardie noted that he was reporting on the year when, for the first time, it became a £1 million company.

At a time when Britain's economy was in the worst trouble it had known for many years, Hardie was able to report "double digit growth over the last few years," with 716 U3As, more than 229,000 members, and one new U3A being formed every week.

The U3A has come a very long way since that first executive meeting in Michael Young's London-bound car. It is in fine condition, and better known and more influential than ever before.