



## ORIGINS OF THE U3A MOVEMENT

The first U3As were founded in France and they have now spread right around the world

Most international movements have small beginnings; this one was started by a summer school, held at the University of Toulouse in 1972. Organised by Pierre Vellas, Professor of Political Economy, it offered, to retired persons, a program of lectures, concerts, guided tours and other cultural activities, making use of lecture halls and classrooms not in use at that time of year.

'Like all actors in human history, and the more so all pioneers and innovators, Vellas "did not know what he was doing". When after a few weeks the program came to an end, such were the determination and enthusiasm of its participants that, instead of preparing a repeat for the next summer, Vellas was forced to launch a program for the forthcoming academic year, to find rooms, lecturers and tutors. In no time similar undertakings mushroomed in France and abroad.'

Michel Philibut, in 'Mutual Aid Universities', edited by Eric Midwinter† (Croom Helm, 1984)

The 'Third Age' in the title refers to a phase of life. After the first age of dependent childhood comes the second age of independent adulthood in work and home-making, followed by the third age, the age of active retirement. For some, this is followed by a fourth age of dependence and senility; often not a happy age. It may be said that one of the major aims of Universities of the Third Age (U3As) is the lengthening of the third age and the

shortening (or even, perhaps, the elimination) of the fourth age.

The original U3As were initiated in France by traditional, established universities. Nevertheless, variations in structure soon occurred. In a list published in 1979, of 49 French U3As, 22 were described as agencies or services of universities but 16 existed as associations under a 'law of 1901' (similar, presumably, to our law governing incorporated associations). The remainder had a variety of associations with government and community organisations. This same pattern continued as the U3A movement spread rapidly to other European countries.

Despite this diversity, however, some conservative attitudes about relationships with universities persist. The International Association of U3As (commonly known as AIUTA), founded in 1975, has interesting membership rules. There are two main classes. Titular members are bodies which are recognisably U3As. Associate membership can be accorded to national or regional associations of U3As, to non-degree-awarding establishments, to research institutes or to further education bodies.

In 1995, the U3A Network-Victoria joined AIUTA as an Associate member, largely in order to maintain contact with this, the only international association of U3As.

### THE 'CAMBRIDGE MODEL'

When the concept crossed the Channel, a significantly modified version appeared. Initiation by universities or other existing agencies was largely replaced, in the UK, by the notion of volunteer, self-help organisations. The main guidelines proposed in 'the Cambridge model', as it has become known, can be summarised thus:

\* A U3A consists of a body of persons who undertake to learn and to help others learn (or in other ways to assist in the functioning of the organisation).

\* Joining a U3A is a question of personal choice. No qualifications are

required for admission; no formal assessments are offered.

\* The curriculum of a U3A is as wide as its human and financial resources permit; the preference of members is the only criterion of what is done.

The author of the first draft prospectus of the University of the Third Age in Cambridge was Dr Peter Laslett, of Trinity College. This document takes a firm moral stance. For example it includes, in its preamble, the statement that 'the committee firmly believes that it is both morally right and socially essential to provide opportunities of a broadly constructive nature to this large (third age) element in our society'. Its first Object is 'to educate British society at large in the facts of its present age constitution and of its permanent situation in respect of ageing' and the second is 'to assail the dogma of intellectual decline with age and make those in their later years aware of their intellectual, cultural and aesthetic potentialities'; this tone persists throughout the document.

It is the notion of coming together to learn from one another which encourages retention of the word 'University' in the title; an echo, one hopes, of the original mediaeval concept of a community of scholars. The Cambridge prospectus affirms the status of its new foundation as 'a university in the original sense, that is a co-operative of persons devoted to a particular educational activity. The Victorian and more recent idea of a university as an exclusively academic and examination-oriented institution will be avoided.'

It must be admitted that the title can sometimes be a little counter-productive. Many people find the idea of joining a 'university' for the first time, in their retirement, a bit daunting. However the description 'Universities of the Third Age' has stuck and is now internationally recognised by UNESCO and other agencies; and, in any case, no-one has come up with a better generic title for this movement.