

2008 Shanghai International Conference on the Development of Old Age Programmes

Abstract of a paper offered by Stanley Miller, President of the International Association of Universities of the Third Age

As a contribution to the conference, this paper will first briefly examine the changing demographics of old age, noting that increasing longevity is a worldwide phenomenon. While occurring at differential rates across continents and countries, increasing longevity can be accounted for by a number of factors, including improvements in medical care, housing, hygiene and educational provision. Examination of population statistics reveals a marked and universal trend towards growth in both numbers and proportions of older people (65 and over). In addition to those already mentioned, another key factor in the changing demographic pattern is a reducing birth rate in a significant majority of countries.

Numerous concerns and predictions in respect of the possible consequences of these shifting patterns have given rise to an increasing interest in gerontology which, in turn, has led to a re-examination of the notion of "old age". The paper will show that old age has traditionally been seen simply as part of the chronology of life, having largely negative attributes for both the individual and society at large, particularly at a time of a decreasing population of younger people able to support older "dependents". This negative view is countered by those ⁽¹⁾ who show that this deficit model of old age is out-dated, with a large and growing body of evidence leading to a much more positive view of old age, best described in terms of phases of life. Using the descriptors devised by the late Peter Laslett, reference will be made to the notions of the 3rd and 4th Ages, where attributes and activities determine the appropriate classification rather than simple chronology.

A closer examination of the 3rd Age will then follow as an introduction to a section devoted to "active ageing". Possible definitions of "active ageing" will be reviewed, of which the preferred one will be that used by the World Health Organisation. The paper will then offer examples of the way in which this notion is put into practice in different situations and locations. Emphasis will be placed on activities involving older people in learning, be it in travel, cultural, physical, intellectual, technical or artistic activities. Among the organisations promoting such activities, mention will be made of Elderhostel in the U.S.A.; the Senior Studies Institute of the University of Strathclyde in Scotland; the Zentrum für Allgemeine Wissenschaftliche Weiterbildung (the Centre for General Scientific Training) at the University of Ulm, Germany; the Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile; Wuhan University for the Aged, China, as well as numerous other institutions and groups in many different countries.

Among those other organisations involved in providing active ageing learning opportunities for older people, a significant proportion is to be found within the Universities of the Third Age. Here the paper will give an account of the development of this movement, tracing not only its rapid rise from its inception in the early 1970s in France, but also taking account of its other manifestations under different names, particularly in the USA and Canada. The ways in which U3A (Universities of the Third Age) operate in different countries will be examined using the description of the

“5 models” postulated by Jean-Louis Levesque (University of Sherbrooke, Quebec, Canada) in a document prepared during his period of office as President of the International Association of Universities of the Third Age (IAUTA). The role and function of this latter organisation will also be described, as seen by the author of this paper, its current President. This section will conclude with examples of the programmes and activities undertaken by U3A in different countries, as well as those promoted by IAUTA, with some verbatim comments made by individual participants.

The paper concludes with some discussion of various current issues in the field of active ageing and Third Age learning. These include the question of the nature of Third Age provision: should it be seen as a part of adult education or as a separate targeted offering? What is the most appropriate form of provision – formal or informal learning? A further issue to be explored in this section will be balance of advantage in emphasising the social or the educational benefits of 3rd Age provision. Finally, there will be an attempt to evaluate the impact of 3rd Age learning on the individuals concerned and on their communities, with, where possible, the inclusion of some first-hand comments.

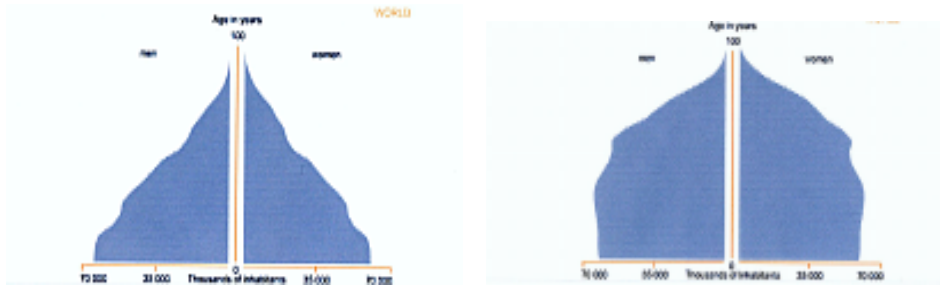
⁽¹⁾ e.g. Deriaz, 2002; Moulias, 2007; Franken, 2007.

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***A Contribution to the
2008 Shanghai International Conference
“Development of Programmes for Old People”
from
Stanley Miller
President, International Association of Universities of the Third Age***

It is unfortunate that the timing of your conference prevents a direct participation because of a clash with meetings here in Europe. However, I wanted to be able to offer a contribution and this paper is intended to throw some light on programmes for older people, with particular reference to learning.

But first a question: why should there be this concern to develop programmes for older people? In the first instance, the answer must surely be that there are already, and there are going to be a lot more older people. In terms of quantity, the evidence is clear: United Nations statistics graphically reveal the changing demographics of old age. The diagram below, taken from the French National Institute for Demographics (INED) and based on 2007 UN figures, shows the changing pattern over a brief 50 year period from 1998 on the left to 2048 on the right. The reducing spiral of older people in the first pattern is replaced by the bulging numbers of older people in the second.



J rome Binde, of UNESCO, in a booklet produced by FIAPA, writes as follows in relation to longevity:

“Changing demography, the effects of which have long been evident in Northern countries and in a country like France for almost two centuries, has also shaken up the demographic map of most Southern countries, with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa where the change is only just beginning. Between 1950 and 2025 the number of people aged over 60 will probably have increased 6 times over worldwide. In 2050 one person in 5 will be 60 or over. In 2030, for example, China will have roughly 400 million people over 60 years of age.”¹

In my own country, the United Kingdom, a similar pattern can be observed. Decreases in mortality during the second half of the twentieth century and fertility below replacement level since 1973 have led to an increasingly ageing population. In the same FIAPA publication referred to above, Robert Moulia, the President of the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics, makes the point that ageing populations result from a number of different factors: reduction in the birth-rate; reduction in poverty; better diet; better housing and educational improvements. All these lead to a delay and a reduction in the period of debilitating illness and incapacity prior to death. As he puts it *“the age of fatal illness or incapacity is being pushed back”*.²

In terms of demography, this ‘pushing back’ of the debilitating period of old age reveals itself in the trend towards population growth among the oldest old, those aged 85 and over. An examination of the International Data Base of the United States Census Bureau shows that as a percentage of the world population, the 80+ group is growing at a rate which currently matches that of the “baby boomers” of the 60-64 age group. In the past 10 years, these oldest old have increased by 0.4% worldwide whereas the younger group have only grown by 0.1%.³ However, by 2020 this position will be reversed with the 60-64 age group increasing by a further 0.9% against a 0.5% increase among the 80+ group. All this goes to suggest that considerable extension to the length of life has been and will continue to be achieved at very old ages.

¹ FIAPA (la F d ration Internationale des Associations des Personnes Ag es) Cahiers No. 6, 2007 p.9 (My translation)

² Ibid.

³ The % increase among the 80+ is only 0.3 in less well developed countries but a whole 1% in the more developed countries.

The rise in the proportion of older people is also affected by the reducing proportion of younger people. In 2007 only India, China and a number of African countries recorded a proportion of 15 year olds in excess of 20% of the total population. It is this factor, combined with those already mentioned, which explains the differing shapes of the population profiles shown in the figure above.

The consequences of these shifting demographic patterns have been and continue to be much discussed by governments, in academic circles, in community groups and, of course, in the media. Increased interest in the study of gerontology and in the whole field of ageing is a not unexpected outcome of these discussions. There is a clear distinction, however, between the conclusions drawn by those who perceive the growth in the number of older people as a burden and those who regard it as an opportunity. It is helpful in considering conflicting perceptions to take an example from a different field. The eminent conductor, Daniel Barenboim, has courageously brought young Israelis and Palestians together in an orchestra which regularly performs in international concert halls. In addressing the audience at such a concert in London recently, he remarked that people frequently ask him what is wrong with the Middle East. With a sweep of the hand towards his musicians he proclaimed to thunderous applause *“This is what’s right with the Middle East”*.

So it is with perceptions of the increasing number of older people. Gloomy forecasts of diminishing numbers in the working population struggling to meet the demand for services from increasing numbers of the elderly have fed on the traditional view of old people as infirm, inactive and unproductive. Such a view is based on the “what’s wrong with.” approach to the increasing proportion of older people in the population, an approach which fails to make the important distinction between increasing longevity and an ageing population. Moulias ⁴ puts it succinctly: *“we are old later”* and therefore active life is available for longer. Thus the negative perception of catastrophe becomes one of increasing possibilities for all of us.

This much more positive view is echoed by Graeme Duncan ⁵:

“The official literature concerning older age, from government, health and social services and the voluntary sector, envisages the empowerment of older people and generally takes a positive view of their capacities, rejecting sharply the old negative models of provision from on high, delivered to a passive, subordinate and fading clientele.”

And he adds:

“The grounds for this approach are not necessarily love and respect for older humankind, and may indeed arise from more pragmatic considerations e.g. that prevention is not only better but also much cheaper than cure”

Elizabeth Franken makes a similar point ⁶:

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *“Learning through Participation: the Role of Older People in Policy and Planning, “Legacy of Learning Conference”, Strathclyde 2007*

“For decades, for centuries, all people “sixty and older” were defined only as “OLD”, “old and grey”. They disappeared far from the common landscape, suddenly or progressively but surely. In 2007, one must say that the borderline steps back: more and more people live 20 or 30 years after their sixtieth anniversary but they don’t seem old or they don’t feel so or they don’t like to be called old.”

And she draws a further important conclusion:

“We also know that children sometimes say: “When I was young ...” and it is not ridiculous. AGE is a CONCEPT and it is a “related reality”: from the day of our birth till the day of our death, we grow older; but the way is unequal, we don’t race at the same speed all along. This is true for each of us and for all of us.”

Madeline Deriaz ⁷ in a section of her paper entitled ‘New roles for new seniors’, writing from the perspective of a well developed Northern country, makes similar points:

“The myths and stereotypes concerning older people are not only related to their inevitable cognitive decline but also to their place and role in society. They are portrayed as a weight, a costly burden on health and social services. They are often treated as the scapegoat for all the problems in our society (Lefrançois, 2004). It is undeniable that some older people who live to a “great age” need constant care and attention from the social services. But that affects only a small percentage of them, less than 7%. For the majority of older people the reality is very different. On the contrary, they are consumers who contribute to the growth of the economy (Lefrançois, 2005). They make use of all kinds of goods and services, they travel. Quite often, they help out with their children and grand-children and they make up the great majority of volunteers upon whom depends the work of many sectors in our society.”

The contrast between the positive reality of many older people and the negative stereotype frequently adopted in the media and elsewhere is an issue taken up by Klaus-Peter Schwitzer, an expert adviser to the German Centre for the Study of Ageing. Under the heading “Perceptions of Old Age and Old People”⁸ he states that there is scientific recognition of the fact that

- *For an increasing number, growing older means greater freedom, greater security and greater autonomy;*
- *Extending the average life-span is a gain not only for the individual but also for society;*
- *That older people have considerable skills, potential and resources which are available to be used and expanded.*

⁶ “Sharing the Ages-Sharing the Culture” “Legacy of Learning Conference”, Strathclyde 2007

⁷ Doctorate student at the University of Montreal, Canada, in « À PROPOS DES APPRENANTS AÎNÉS: Une contribution pour défaire les mythes qui entourent la vieillesse » = “Regarding Older Learners: a contribution to demystifying old age”, 2002 (My translation)

⁸ Page 9, “Alte Meister”, Wolfenbütteler Akademie-Texte, Band 25, Bundesakademie für kulturelle Bildung Wolfenbüttel, 2006 (My translation)

Emerging from this more positive view of ageing is a concept in which chronology is less meaningful than life stages and capacity, both physical and mental, as these are seen to be a more accurate way of recognising the increasing variations between individuals. (Moulias, 2007).

In his contribution to the “*Legacy of Learning Conference*” Manheimer⁹ describes this development with particular reference to the United States:

“Arrival of the massive Boomer generation to the threshold of retirement has refuted generalizations about an undifferentiated age wave. Instead, increasing interest is focused on diversity factors such as gender, income, health, mental outlook, genetic make up, ethnicity, educational background, and even geographic location. Added to this is the widespread resistance found throughout the middle-aged population to being labeled by age categories.

Older adult education in the United States reflects these major shifts in how aging and later life have been understood. It is very possible that the U.S. is moving toward an “ageless society” in which chronological aging and retirement status no longer serve adequately to predict or describe the life styles of vast segments of the mature population.”

Whether or not such an “ageless society” will become more generalized, the notion of the 3rd and 4th Ages is now already well established and widely used in relation to activities, organizations and provision for older people. This categorization is generally ascribed to the British academic, Peter Laslett:

“Among the depictions of the lifecourse, that of prominent educational gerontologist, Peter Laslett has been particularly influential. In his well-known book, “A fresh map of life” (1989), he writes of four major phases or ages: in the first age of life, one of early socialisation, a person is heavily dependent on others, usually parents; the second age is one of adult maturity in which typically individuals take on increased responsibilities of social relationships, career development, perhaps childrearing and financial autonomy. In the third age, there are renewed opportunities available to adults free from the constraints of the second age; it is a time for exercising greater freedom and creativity, sometimes suppressed in the “peak” of life when duties and obligations to work took precedence. In the fourth and final age, a person prepares for death and may once again be dependent, as in the first age.”¹⁰

It should now be clear that this examination of demographic trends and reflections on the concept of ageing have constituted a necessary preliminary to a consideration of programme development for old people. If the 3rd Age is one in which the demands of working life reduce (and this includes all forms of work, not exclusively paid work!), and opportunities for personal fulfilment now become more readily available, then careful consideration needs to be given to the form, content and ‘delivery’ of programmes.

⁹ Ronald J. Manheimer: *Lifelong Learning in the Coming Ageless Society: Perspectives on the North American Scene*, Strathclyde, 2007

¹⁰ Findsen & McCullough: “Then, now and after...Learners’ reflections on a lifetime of learning”, Strathclyde, 2007

In the first instance, it is helpful to set such consideration in the context of ‘active ageing’. This is because it enables a focus on the individual older person who should be at the heart of all programme planning. As early as 1963, Havighurst¹¹ was emphasising the difference between a theory of ageing which led to a readiness to withdraw from active life and a theory of successful ageing involving as far and for as long as possible activity appropriate to an earlier stage of life. This again leads to the need for a wide-ranging provision focussing on individual needs and aspirations. As an interesting example of the way in which individuals develop strategies for “successful ageing”, Kern quotes Baltes and Baltes (1989) in the case of the ageing pianist Arthur Rubinstein.

“In an interview, he revealed some of the devices he used to compensate for the slowing down caused by ageing. First, he limited his repertoire so as to reduce the number of pieces he actually played (selection), but on the other hand played them more often (optimisation). Finally, before playing very rapid sections, he would put in a slight ritardando so that the contrast gave the impression of a more rapid conclusion than was, in fact, the case. (compensation)”¹²

“Active Ageing” is sometimes used to describe physical activities designed to maintain a healthy life style in old age. However, the preferred definition is that adopted by the World Health Organisation where it

“ is the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance the quality of life as people age. It applies to both individuals and population groups. It allows people to realize their potential for physical, social and mental well being throughout the life course and to participate in society according to their needs, desires and outcomes. ”¹³

This definition of ‘active ageing’ is echoed in a description of the Third Age by Sonia Hetzner:

“The 'third age' of human life is becoming markedly longer. The post-professional life span can become a period that opens up on new opportunities and new perspectives in an active and self-determined life. Besides this individual perspective, the societal perspective is of equal importance: due to decreasing birth rates throughout Europe, the competence and experience of elderly people will be absolutely fundamental in the future - in order to support the economical demands and to maintain the overall competence of European society. In addition, it is crucial to prevent the social isolation of seniors citizens and to ensure that ageing populations are able to lead independent lives, in order to be able to cope with the dramatic consequences of demographic changes and their implications for European welfare systems.”¹⁴

¹¹ Quoted by Dominique Kern in « Comment soutenir les personnes âgées dans leur projet de vie ? » (How to support older people's life styles ?) Journées d'Etude « L'âge et le pouvoir en question », Paris 2007 (Study days : Age and Capacity Reviewed) (My translation)

¹² Ibid

¹³ WHO Website

¹⁴ Sonia Hetzner; Proceedings of “Legacy of Learning” Conference, Strathclyde 2007, p 119

In this “active and self-determined” third age opportunities can be found for travel, cultural, physical and intellectual pursuits, artistic activities and the development of technical skills, as well as in work on behalf of others in the community. These opportunities vary from place to place and are often offered by organisations dedicated specifically to provision for older participants. Although most are not for profit or government organisations, some, such as “Third Age”, based in the USA or “Saga” in the UK, are commercial undertakings which focus on the Third Age market. For the most part, however, it is under the aegis of bodies operating within the framework of ‘education’ that the majority of third age active ageing programmes occur. In the USA and Canada, the Elderhostel movement has provided over many years educational travel programmes for its members. These have enabled them to learn at first hand about other countries and other peoples within the secure framework of organised, well-informed travel programmes. Examples can be found on the movement’s website at www.elderhostel.org where there is also a link to an offshoot of Elderhostel, the Elderhostel Institute. The Institute promotes the development of self-organised third age learning organisations, many of which in the USA and Canada go under the name of “Learning in Retirement Institutes”.

The Senior Studies Institute of the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland is a leading organisation for the development of programmes for third age learners. To quote its website “*The Senior Studies Institute (SSI) is part of the University of Strathclyde's Centre for Lifelong Learning, and provides an extensive range of educational opportunities aimed at older adults.*” In its 2008-2009 programme, among its many other activities, it lists a number of cultural activities, one example of which is offered in a course entitled “*How Does Music Work?*” described as follows:

‘This class offers a gentle introduction to the formal principles which govern the composition and performance of music. This class introduces Rhythm, Pitch, Staff Notation, Melody, Harmony, Chords, Keys, Scales and Cadences. We will look at how modern songwriters borrow tricks from the classics and what Oasis did to Pachelbel’s Canon! A wide range of listening, backed-up by clear handouts and a free CD! You should complete this class with a solid grounding in basic music theory. No previous musical experience necessary.’

Another musical activity aimed at the third age is reported from the Netherlands:

“The Euro+ Songfestival with its three time experience in Rotterdam, Porto and other cities provides a format in which the European singing talents can flourish and excel. Started during the Rotterdam Cultural Capital of Europe 2001, the festival has learned a lot since then about talent development for the musically inclined 50+.....Having learned from the 2001 festival, the emphasis has changed from competition to talent development for the over 50. Especially since it shows that most are very good, giving it their utmost to perform with their favourite, heartfelt song...So the Euro+ Songfestival now provides masterclasses and workshops for everyone interested to participate. The masters come from the different music cultures. In 2005 for example: from the Caribbean, Chinese Cantonese Opera, Turkish, Opera, Classical. Workshops were taught in breathing techniques, movement

on stage and the use of a microphone. After which the participants were much better prepared for the festival itself.”¹⁵

At the University of Ulm, Germany, their ‘*Zentrum für Allgemeine Wissenschaftliche Weiterbildung*’ (Centre for General Scientific Training) is a leading player in the development of programmes for older learners which involve third agers not only from Germany but in multinational settings and intergenerational activities. The particular strength of this organization is in familiarization with and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). ZAWIW has pioneered collaborative activities in the training of trainers for the provision of digital competence for older learners. The bulletin of the recent two year European project entitled “*e-Learning in Later Life*” (eLiLL) contains much useful information for those involved in working with third agers in the field of ICT. A full list of the many third age projects with which the Centre has been involved is available at www.uni-ulm.de/uni/fak/zawiw/ .

Among its many other activities in the field of geriatrics and gerontology, the Catholic University of Chile has also been proactive in the process of maintaining among older people traditional arts and crafts and in their preservation for future generations. In a volume entitled “*Maestros artesanos*” (*Master Craftsmen*), there are more than a dozen examples of the work of third age craftsmen and women from different regions of Chile. This work not only celebrates their creativity and artistry but also, in the words of the book, provides “*a solid contribution focusing on UNESCO’s priorities: the preservation and transmission of living cultural patrimony and the promotion of excellence in craftsmanship...*”.

Examples of the promotion of physical activities as part of active ageing can be found in Portugal and in Portuguese speaking Brazil. The organisation RUTIS which acts as a federal body for senior learning institutions in Portugal, lists swimming, walking, yoga and gymnastics among the activities of its members. In Brazil the Age Seniors Center promotes four aspects of health, mental, spiritual, social and physical. In the latter case it lists pilates, dancing, yoga and various other forms of physical exercise.

Intellectual activity is in evidence in virtually all the centers offering active ageing programmes for third age learners. For most people, this type of activity, in courses, lectures, seminars and workshops, constitutes the more obvious feature of learning at any age. (In the final part of this paper, however, attention will be drawn to the need take account of the particular context of third age learning in the preparation and delivery of such activities.) As one example of third age intellectual activity, a sample of the Spring/Summer programme 2008 of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute in San Marcos, California, USA included:

Inspiration from World Faiths; Creative Writing; Early Renaissance Art; Islam and the Crusades AD 100-1500; China; Care of Souls, etc., etc.

At Wuhan University for the Aged in China, the range of intellectual or academic courses includes politics, law, Chinese history and traditional medicine as well as

¹⁵ C.Groot: *Strathclyde Conference Proceedings, 2007, p 116*

language learning. This latter subject is one taken up in the majority of third age learning institutions in countries across the world.

At McGill University in Montreal, Canada, their Institute for Learning in Retirement (MILR) had, for example, study groups during Spring 2008 devoted to Montreal's stained glass; Expressionist Art of the 20th Century; Film Studies and Musical Theatre: Broadway to London's Westend

This type of course provision is replicated in numerous centres of third age learning in many countries and provides stimulus and fulfillment for literally thousands of older learners.

In concluding this brief review of aspects of "active ageing", it is important to refer to the enormous contribution made by third agers in terms of child-care and support for children's learning, as well as in more obvious voluntary activities in their communities. Although many such contributions are family based and informal, they are nonetheless significant for both contributors and recipients.

"Why should there be this concern to develop programmes for older people?" was a question posed at the beginning of this paper. Sheer growth in numbers was a first, preliminary answer. A second and much more pertinent response is that *"we cannot afford, in economic or social terms, to encourage the notion that after a certain period, we have the right to take a back seat and wait to be looked after."*¹⁶ This is about the empowerment of older people, those in the third age of life who seize this opportunity through membership of the University of the Third Age.

The beginnings of the University of the Third Age can be found in the University of Toulouse in France in the early 1970s where, in an initiative of the late Professor Pierre Vellas, the University considered what it could do to improve the lives of older people – an increasingly numerous group – whose socio-economic situation, health and care were seen to be in a deplorable state. From this local initiative, the U3A movement has spread across the world so that today literally millions of older people in different countries and continents participate in a range of intellectual, cultural and recreational activities which all contribute to "active ageing" and to a changing perception of what it is to grow old.

Initially the Universities of the Third Age (U3A) were a francophone initiative operating in France, Belgium, Switzerland, Quebec but also spreading to other European and Scandinavian countries, Italy, Spain, Poland, Sweden and Finland. By the early 80s anglophone versions had begun to develop in the United Kingdom, then in Australia, New Zealand, Malta, Cyprus. In each case and in each country subtle or even major differences occurred in the organisation and conduct of the U3A but the basic premise of an open third age learning community remained common to them all. The growth of the U3A movement has been dramatic and, in various forms and manifestations, examples can be found in more than 30 countries and this does not take into account those other forms of third age learning institutions referred to earlier which go under other names as, for example, in the USA and Canada.

¹⁶ The LENA handbook "Learning that works for older people", GEFAS Steiermark, 2007, p8

In a 1995 document Swindell and Thompson made reference to the “*Two University of the Third Age Models*”¹⁷ which, some ten years later, had become 5 models as identified by the then President of IAUTA¹⁸, Jean-Louis Levesque. These different types or models of U3A are all dedicated to the same ideal of providing non-award bearing, open learning provision for those in the third age of life. Professor Levesque’s categories include

- the west European or ‘Vellas’ model which is closely linked to or is part of an existing university;
- the Anglo-Saxon model as practised particularly in the United Kingdom and in various forms in other English-speaking countries – here the predominant feature is shared self-help learning;
- the North American French-speaking model which follows the Vellas model but with a significant student contribution to the design of courses;
- the South American model based on Vellas with a major input into learning provision for the whole elderly population;
- the Chinese model which is focused on community life and the maintenance of traditional culture.

Within these broad categories, with their local variations, there are programmes ranging in their design and delivery from top-down to bottom-up; from university delivered courses underwritten with guarantees of academic excellence through to self-organised participative learning activities, whose quality is assessed in terms of the effect the learners perceive them to have and the value they place on them.

The essential features of the U3A are that it demands no previous qualifications or learning experience; it offers no awards and, therefore, sets up no examination hurdles which the learner is required to scale; it offers multiple opportunities for learning within a social context. Kali Lightfoot, of the Osher Foundation in the USA, describes the empowering experience of third age learners where “*despite the absence of the usual academic demands and controls, they found themselves taking responsibility for their own learning.*”¹⁹ The importance of this direct engagement in the learning process is well-known among educationalists but perhaps less obvious is the specific benefit which it can have on U3A members. This has been shown within recent developments in brain science where the kind of positive, nurturing environment found in the U3A encourages interaction and response and so fulfils the prime conditions for building complex neural networks, literally helping to reshape our brains. (Bisland 2007)²⁰ The conjunction of the numerical growth of the third age, increasing longevity and a recognition of the benefits and possibilities of later life learning has brought about a quite dramatic growth in the U3A movement.

¹⁷ “*An International Perspective on the University of the Third Age*”, *Educational Gerontology*, 21:429-447, 1995

¹⁸ *The International Association of Universities of the Third Age*

¹⁹ Strathclyde “*Legacy of Learning*” Conference 2007. “*Transformations through Teaching and Learning*” p.149

²⁰ *Ibid.* “*Learning in Later Life & Brain Science – the importance of emotions*”

Whether or not the first U3A²¹ was in Toulouse, France, as is generally accepted, the crucial role of Professor Pierre Vellas is uncontested, all the more so as he was also the founder of the International Association which dates from 1975. IAUTA was set up in order “*to federate, all over the world, Universities of the Third Age and organisations, which have different names but which subscribe to its objectives*”, of which the principle one is “*to constitute, with the support of Universities around the world, an international framework of a lifelong educational nature and concerned with research for, by and with the old*”.²²

As a voluntary body, IAUTA relies heavily on the contributions of its members, individuals, U3A or Associations of U3A in more than 23 countries at present. Its major public function is an international conference normally held every second year hosted by a member institution. Reference to the Association’s website will provide a full list of previous conferences (www.aiuta.org).

Behind the scenes, IAUTA encourages international cooperation between U3A, such as that which produced a study of proverbs across a number of European countries and involving partners in several of those countries. This study has culminated in two publications under the direction of a longstanding member of the Governing Board of IAUTA, Professor Paulin Duchesne, Namur, Belgium.²³

IAUTA also provides a point of contact for individual U3A or U3A associations to create exchanges with fellow U3A in other countries. For example, enquiries in the current year are leading to links between U3A in the UK and “partner” organisations in the USA, Japan and Switzerland.

The encouragement and support of U3A in different countries, both those with well-established or those where the development is just beginning, is another role undertaken by IAUTA. In the past two years, U3A in Poland, Japan and India have all sought the help of IAUTA and, hopefully, benefited from this support.

The activities of U3A in different countries resemble those quoted above in relation to active ageing and the individual programmes also cover a similar range of activities – cultural, artistic, intellectual and physical. The major difference is that these programmes are open, non-award bearing, often low cost and in many cases directed at least in part by the learners themselves.

Three examples taken at random will give an indication of the type of provision often seen within U3A:

At the UDA of Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium (*Université des Aînés =the University for Older People*) the autumn programme for 2007 included **lectures** on juvenile delinquency, astronomy, the media, music, etc. Weekly **courses** on theology, philosophy, personal development (one of which was on “*Being a contented Grand-parent*”), anthropology, the history of art, languages, photography. **Workshops** of

²¹ *Similar organisations but not using the U3A formula had existed in the USA from the 1960s.*

²² *AIUTA Statuts / IAUTA Constitution*

²³ “*L’Europe unie dans ses proverbes*” and “*L’Europe à table et au travail dans la sagesse populaire*”; *Les Editions Namuroises 2006 and 2008*

different lengths dealt with topics such as story-telling, voice production, life-story writing.

In preparation for the development of a U3A network in India, its founder, Dr R.N.Kapoor, has listed in a concept paper the activities and subject areas appropriate to an Indian U3A. Included are *“Education in finance management investment planning and economics(which) will assist elderly and also pre- retirees; For good health, proper nutrition is necessary and knowledge about proper diet is also important for prevention of diseases, healthy and active ageing; Role of religion and spirituality is important in improving the art of living. Proper study of religion, workshops , seminars and group discussions will provide better knowledge and understanding about the graceful living.”* Together with these, Dr Kapoor lists the more familiar academic subjects: languages, history, comparative religions, journalism, economics, political science, psychology, sociology, music and arts, photography, computer science, anthropology etc.

For the U3A at the Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovak Republic, the following activities are among those on offer:

Archaeology, Economics, History of the fine art , History of religions, Philosophy, Gerontology, Slovak history, Environmental science, Japanese culture, Yoga, Ethnology, Social work, Medicine, Psychology, Computers and Information Technology, Law, Journalism, Horticulture and gardening .

Along with lectures and seminars, excursions, panel discussions, visits to other universities, informal meetings, visits to theatres, themed trips and vacations are also offered.

If these examples are typical of what the U3A has to offer, how do the members react to it? What follows is a selection of verbatim comments in response to the question of what works about the U3A:

“I enjoy the strong camaraderie and I have a great many friends through the U3A”, “sense of belonging to a group”, “the variety of interests for which it caters”, “purposeful learning”, “Non-competitiveness and social interaction increases understanding”²⁴

In response to the question of whether the U3A had changed her, a member provided the following response:

“ I think it has. It’s not just my own recognition. My husband...I think he knew from the way in which my interests were being stimulated...and the fact that there were lots of things I could grasp and be capable of taking on board that I wouldn’t even have thought about a long time ago...And I wanted more of it and still do”

and from another member of the same U3A who had agreed to convene a group:

²⁴ Taken from *“Lessons for a Changing Society”*, O’Keefe, Atkinson & Pinkerton, University of Sunderland, UK, 2005

*“It’s knowing how to talk. I was so afraid they’d be bored...I thought nobody would come and then they came....but I had an awful few days worrying. I learned a lot. It’s changed me...Given me confidence”*²⁵

Summing up the value which members derive from their U3A activities is this final comment:

*“It is in the best spirit of the U3A movement that one both gives and receives, ultimately it is also the most fulfilling.”*²⁶

This review of active ageing and third age learning raises a number of questions for those seeking to develop programmes for older learners:

- how should such programmes be planned?
- to what extent should they be distinct from other forms of adult learning?
- how to balance learning and social benefits?
- what is the right balance between formal and informal learning?

Undoubtedly, there will be other issues to be explored but these alone provide much food for thought.

In terms of planning, the issue is one of involvement of the learners. As readers of this paper will have noted, the word ‘*education*’ has been used much more sparingly with reference to the persons involved than the word ‘*learning*’. This has been quite deliberate because it reflects the different situation of the third age learner from that of those at other stages of life where learning is a means to an end – for the child, as an essential part of development to adulthood; for the adult in the second (productive) stage of life, as training and skill enhancement. For the third ager, as indicated above, learning is for its own sake, for personal enrichment and development, where, above all, learners determine for themselves what they wish to learn, at what pace and in what manner. The extent to which third age learning is perceived as “*education*” in the sense of a provision made for the learner rather than an activity entered into by the learner will depend on context, tradition and culture. This debate is reflected in the differing models of U3A where, at one extreme, the UK model is of self-directed shared learning involving few outside ‘experts’; at the other extreme is the original French model which is largely dispensed through the academic framework of an existing university. Whichever approach is adopted, Deriaz²⁷ makes the point that

“an absolute essential is the development of a new conceptual framework in which the emphasis is placed on the learning of older people rather than on their education”

and again

“it is no longer possible to offer older learners a single diet of educational activities in which they play a passive role.”

²⁵ Unpublished paper “*Learning in the University of the Third Age*” by Dr.T.S.Chivers, offered to the National Executive of the Third Age Trust, UK, 2004

²⁶ Quoted in “*Successful Strategies for Teaching Older Learners*”, Miller & Richards, Strathclyde, 2007

²⁷ *Op.cit.* My translation

Although four different issues have been suggested as matters for consideration by programme developers, they are essentially different aspects of a single issue. This is about the nature of the third age learning experience, its content, style and outcomes. Hargreaves (2005), quoted in a recent OECD document, presents a clear distinction between types of learning:

“Learning as attaining objectives depicts knowledge as fixed and externally-defined while learning as the construction of knowledge conveys knowledge as fluid, open to reconstruction to aid understanding and in need of „reworking“ by students so that it makes sense to them.”²⁸

Fryer²⁹, in discussing the role of lifelong learning, quotes Delors (1998) as saying that such learning should constitute “*a broad, encompassing view*” which enables “*each individual to discover, unearth and enrich his or her creative potential, to reveal the treasure within each of us. This means going beyond the instrumental view of education, as a process one submits to in order to achieve specific aims (in terms of skills, capacities or economic potential), to one that emphasises the development of the complete person, in short, learning to be.*”

The debate about method, content and provision of programmes for older learners can only be resolved at a local or national level but the above quotations would seem to express very clearly the end in view for all in the third age.

In conclusion, let one or two more third age voices be heard:

“The experiences of learning together, sitting in a full classroom, arriving early to get a good seat, sensing the group excitement of being challenged to learn and accept ideas and theories, reexamining facts....all of this comes close to healthy addiction.....One of the great rewards of participating in this addiction to lifelong learning is the sweetness of finding life in retirement a great joy.”³⁰

“Participants felt that for older people entering education there should be excitement and fulfilment..”³¹

I wish the same for your conference.

August 2008

²⁸ Derrick, J. and K. Ecclestone, (2008), “English-language Literature Review”, in *Teaching, Learning and Assessment for Adults: Improving Foundation Skills*, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/172251338713> (My underlining)p.12

²⁹ “Lifelong Learning, Citizenship and ‘Belonging’ A briefing paper”, NIACE, 2008

³⁰ Betty Bennett quoted in “Learning Later, Living Greater”, Nordstrom & Merz, Sentient Publications, 2006

³¹ Yvonne Coull, Strathclyde, op.cit.