

# U3A ACT: A Historical Perspective

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## Introduction

This year marks the 21st anniversary of the start of U3A ACT. So, we thought we'd invite you along to help us celebrate the continuing growth of U3A in the Canberra region over those 21 years.

We are a very large and successful U3A, with a diverse range of courses, some conventional and some quite unusual. We hope that, by sharing a few ideas with you, we might inspire some of you to consider how you might contribute to your own U3A.

## The Beginning

The first meeting in Canberra was held under the auspices of COTA (Council of the Ageing) in Sep 1986. Cliff Picton from U3A Victoria addressed the meeting. (*Cliff will be at tonight's dinner. And we are pleased to welcome foundation member Shirley Kral to our 21<sup>st</sup> birthday celebrations here today*). A small committee was formed (Chairman, Treasurer, Secretary). I'll quote from the minutes of a meeting held in November: "*From the meeting in September when we first glimpsed the idea of this operation, we have actually commenced courses and are enjoying them.*" Running courses after just two months of existence — the members in 1986 were indeed movers and shakers!

Our First Courses in 1986 were: *Music Appreciation, International Relations, Health and Relaxation, Bible Study, Philosophy and Australian History*. (The last two are celebrating their 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays next month. Happy 21<sup>st</sup> to Philosophy and Australian History 'A' classes!)

(We now have four Australian history classes; History 'A' is our longest running.)

The following year (1987) the first Committee Meeting was held: "*Reports from other U3As indicate the desirability of forming a number of sub-committees including (1) Management, (2) Co-ordination of Program of Classes, and (3) Public Relations/Publicity/Newsletter. The chairpersons of the sub-committees to be members of the committee.*" Mrs Norma Allen, journalist and member, offered to edit a Newsletter.

A copy of our first edition is on the historical items table.

## 6 years later:

From Minutes of Committee Meeting (27 Feb 1992):

Course Coordinators' Report: *Most courses had no vacancies and this was disappointing for new members. The situation underlined the need for new course leaders to come forward, and also raised the issue of whether members should be able to continue in one course indefinitely, thereby preventing new members from joining courses.*

This may have a certain resonance with delegates from other U3As. And it is still a concern in U3A ACT today, although we do have enough courses for everyone to be able to get into at least their second or third choice — or sometimes both.

## The 10th Anniversary

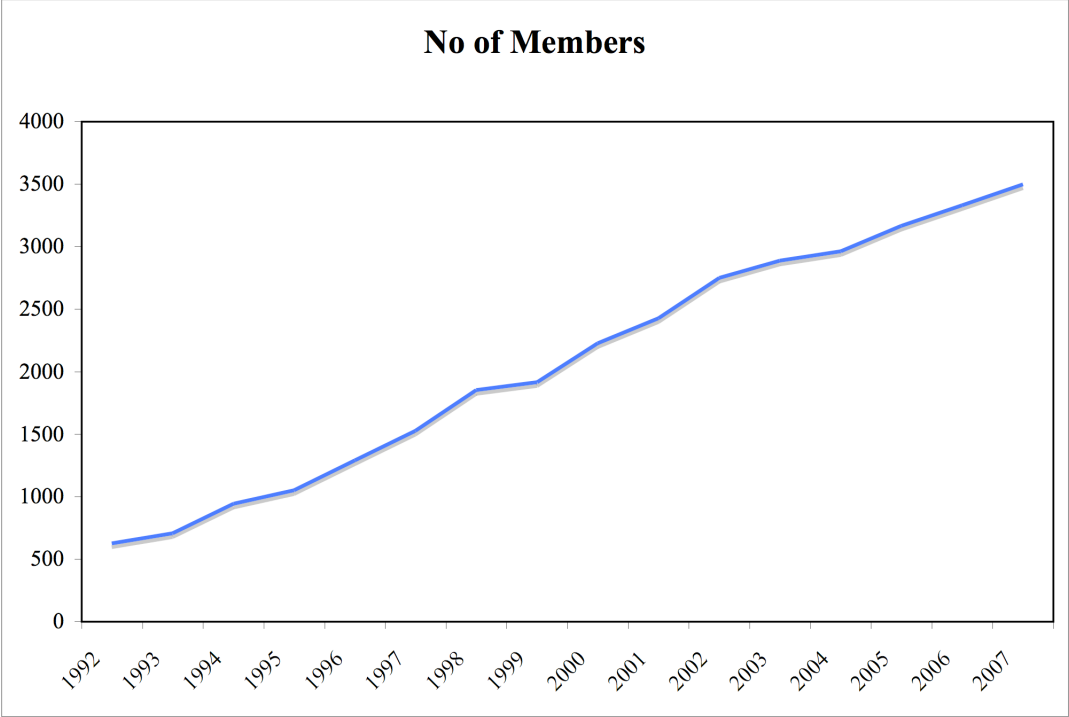
A Conference was held in April 1995 to celebrate our 10th birthday. Over 200 delegates from Australia and New Zealand attended.

At the end of the year our organisation held a lunch, attended by 200 local members. Keynote speaker was Professor Don Aitkin who concluded his address by stating his belief that *one's role in society was to help oneself at all times, and to help others whenever one could.*

These sentiments remain very relevant today, 12 years later.

**Growth of U3A**

Since 1986 our numbers have grown steadily.



Nine years after our birth, our membership had reached 1000.

Our membership climbed above 2000 in the year 2000 ... and then cracked the 3000 mark in 2003.

Total membership is now 3,500, approximately 70% being women.

Perhaps men’s needs in retirement may differ from women’s. One example of satisfying men’s ‘different’ needs might be the Men’s Shed at Grafton, NSW, where men gather weekly in a workshop set up in an old brewery, and indulge their passion for making things using a variety of tools.

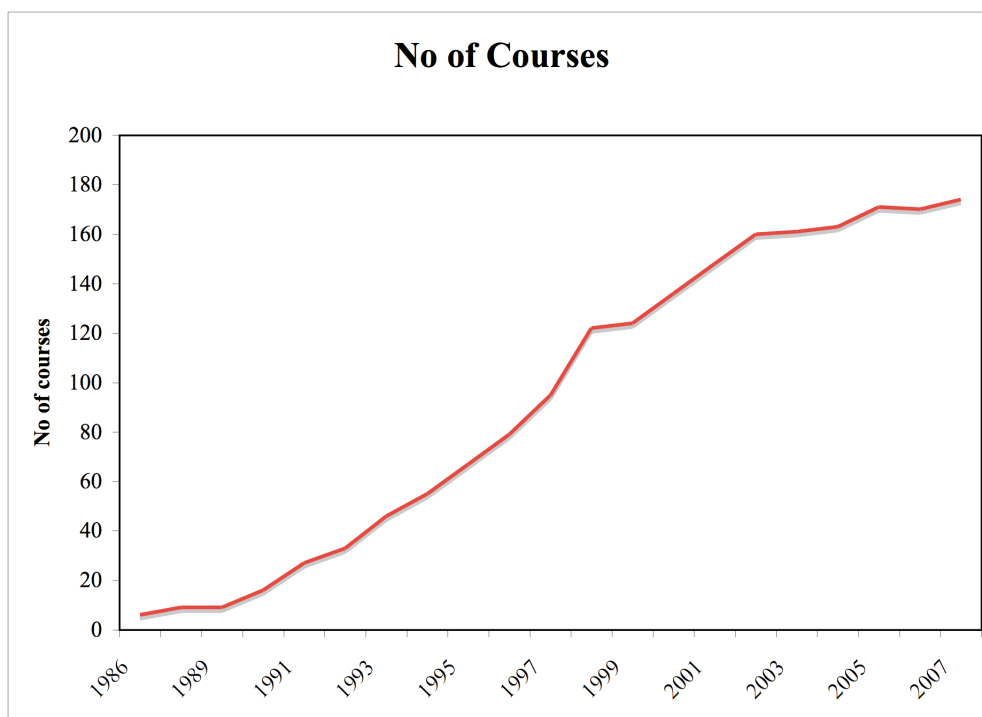
**Annual Membership Changes**

We are gaining many new members but we also lose some, eg:

Year ended	Additions	Losses	Net gain
2007	560	393	167

**Growth in Courses**

We have a number of old Newsletters and Prospectuses on display which reveal the steady growth in advertised courses. For example, by 1997 we offered 94 courses. This year the figure has climbed to 175. Of these, 82 courses lasted for the whole year. Some shorter courses run for three weeks, others are longer — up to 12 weeks. Each year there are occasionally a few one-day courses — some even for two hours only.



Now, let's look at U3A today.

### 2007 Prospectus

This is the index from our 2007 Prospectus:

Art	17	Music	21
Computer Studies	6	Philosophy & Religion	10
Current Affairs	11	Recreational	6
English Language & Literature	22	Science & the Environment	8
History	43	Social & Behavioural Sciences	2
Languages	29		

A total of 147 course leaders have presented these courses. (Some leaders run 2 or 3 courses in a year.) A course can cost from 25c to \$1.50 per week for room hire (the exception being the licensed Clubs which do not charge). Computer classes are \$6 per week.

Then of course there is a small cost for the all-important tea, coffee and biscuits.

Moneys are always collected by a volunteer class Treasurer.

Everyone's a volunteer in U3A ACT!

Student capacity can range from six only to a maximum of 150.

### Some of our more unusual courses:

Celtic Mythology, The Story of Piracy, A History of Witches, Advanced Coptic, Ethics with Aristotle.

### Performing Groups

Apart from course presenters there is a growing number of leaders and conductors of performing groups which present concerts and musical items to U3A members, and to the Canberra community at large. They are:

Warrani Chorale, Conchordia, Warrani Ensemble, the U3A Orchestra, Choral Studies Group, the Recorder Ensemble, and Recorder Orchestra.

These singing/performing members are a very important component of our activities and are often the public face of U3A ACT. You will hear all of them in tomorrow's concert.

### Lunchtime Forums

The popular Lunchtime Forums are held every Tuesday from June to September, from 12.15 to 1.45pm. Each session is attended by between 60 to 90 people. In 2006 the number of attendees totalled over 1,400.

Topics in the past two years have included:

2006	2007
Iraq PNG Foreign Aid The Hydrogen Economy Theatre in Canberra Plant genetics Climate change Medicare for seniors Health and fitness Failing vision Legal issues for seniors Civil liberties and legal rights	Where will I live when I am really Old? Why History? Which History? Your Tax Return The Middle East Living in the Hothouse – Fire! Your Access Card is coming? Do we need a National School Curriculum? The Darling Murray Basin Sleep and perchance to dream The downs and ups of hearing loss Questacon: a Canberra Icon but what is it?

### Management

A complex organisation of more than 3000 members requires a very large number of helpers.

General Committee (12 members)	Course Coordinators Sub-committee, and Room bookings Personnel	Office Manager and many Office Volunteers
Newsletter Packaging Team (Beryl's Elves)	Newsletter Editor and Team	Special sub-committees, eg, <i>Celebration2007</i>
Webmaster	Movie Films Team	Equipment Officer
Members database Officer	Courses Database Manager	Lunchtime Forums Committee

There are at least 100 volunteers involved in the running of our U3A. And this matrix does not include the 150 course presenters!

### Our 'Living Treasures'

Successful U3As thrive when their membership includes people whom I wish to describe as 'living treasures'. We have:

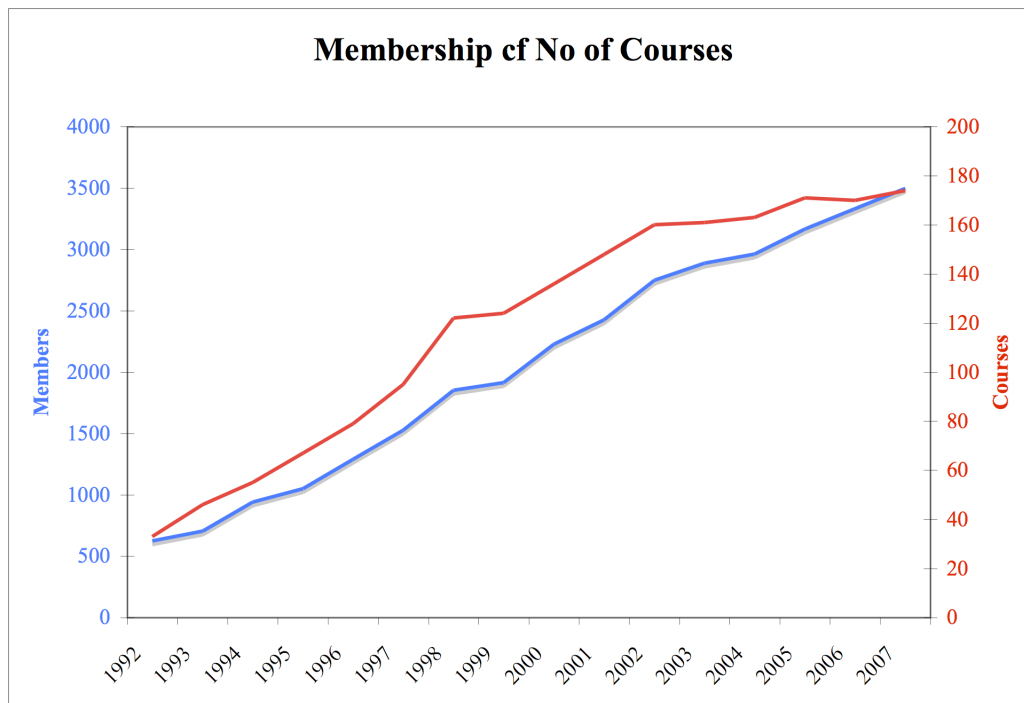
- Some Course presenters who continue in the job year after year after year. Astonishing! Their subjects include Music Appreciation, Current Affairs, Italian. One of our members has presented 25 different courses over the past 12 years.
- Members of the Course Coordinators Sub-committee who ensure a Prospectus is prepared and issued each year to members — before Christmas Day!
- A Newsletter Editor and team who produce high-quality editions six times a year.

- An Equipment Officer who, somewhat amazingly, maintains, and keeps tabs on all our audio-visual hardware which is stored in several locations across Canberra.
- A Leader of a very sociable Newsletter Distribution Team which packages and prepares for posting several thousand Newsletters six times each year.
- A dedicated team which shows movie films from the 1930's through to the 1990's.

## Difficulties

There are seemingly never enough course leaders (but this problem can be overcome!).

As you will note on this graph — where membership is overlaid on the number of courses — our membership continues a steady growth, but the number of courses has flattened out in recent years.



There are not enough volunteers, eg, for committees.

## Venue limitations

- We suffer from the Goldilocks syndrome – we have only two classrooms at our Headquarters: one is too big, and one is definitely too small.
- The North/South ‘divide,’ ie, a reluctance for some members to travel across town to attend courses. Of course, for members who travel on an ACTION bus ‘milk run’ it can be a very long and tedious journey. But apparently some members who drive also choose courses only in their locality, so perhaps the ‘divide’ is not a major problem after all.
- Long course ‘stayers’, ie. members who remain for years in language, music and current affairs classes. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as very good friendships are developed in these long-term classes. But how do you ‘open up’ these classes to other members?
- We also run courses at Community Centres, Senior Citizens Clubs, licenced Clubs, church premises, private dwellings, art studios — wherever we can find a space! Because of this scattering of locations many of us rarely meet and talk to the hundreds and hundreds of other members. And yet, there is no good reason for our very successful U3A to be divided into several separate entities.

- This year U3A ACT is running courses at 48 locations throughout Canberra, and in Yass and Jerrabomberra in NSW. We use rooms at the Australian National University (although we have been informed that we will not be able to hire most of their rooms next year).
- No government support — although we are hopeful of hearing good news from the ACT Government in the near future which might ease our accommodation problems.

### What's the Future for U3A in the ACT?

The attrition rate of members — especially course leaders — will continue to worry any U3A organisation because, for it to survive, it must depend upon the goodwill and generosity of its members in providing their skills, knowledge, expertise and enthusiasm in offering to run courses.



We must reach out to our members: encourage them, entice them, and, where necessary, train them, to become course presenters. For example, one technique is for a ‘seasoned’ course presenter to invite several members to join him or her in running a very short course — such as for one day only.

Furthermore, for the past three years our Committee has organised a Workshop for potential course presenters. This strategy has been an outstanding success.

Later, you will hear five of our successful and experienced course leaders talk about what they do, and how they do it.

### Better facilities for U3A in Canberra.

- Next year we will have three guaranteed classrooms (plus the computer room,) for our 3500 members — and, hopefully, some spaces at the 46 other locations.
- If we could obtain a cluster of five or six classrooms, and other facilities similar to those found at the superb facilities enjoyed by Knox U3A in Melbourne, which is self-contained in its own building, with classrooms, computer training room, library, kitchen and large fully equipped office — then we could engender a greater sense of community than we now enjoy in Canberra.
- It could, I believe, also generate a greater number of course presenters simply by providing opportunities for members to rub shoulders with each other on a regular

basis. And if we do acquire permanent headquarters, for example, on the south side of Canberra, then almost immediately the Committee should be looking for a smaller northside campus.

- Of course, members who live in Yass and Queanbeyan, and nearby NSW, will continue to be welcomed to U3A in the ACT. No passports required to cross the border.

And that's the story of our first 21 years. It's a great success story because there's always been a willingness of many, many members to volunteer their time and their skills. But much more work needs to be done in shaping our large and diverse U3A to meet the needs of baby boomers as they start to make their presence felt in what is now predominantly an organisation populated by frugals (also known as the pre baby-boomers).

Long may U3A flourish in the National Capital!

Happy 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday, U3A ACT.