

AINSLIE LAMB

LIFE LONG LEARNING IN THE THIRD AGE IN AUSTRALIA: A SNAPSHOT

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the most significant social changes in the Twentieth Century has been the demographic revolution whereby, particularly in western developed countries, people are living longer, with dramatic social, economic and political implications. The Third Age – defined as the age beyond childraising and retirement from the paid workforce – is a 20th century phenomenon, where life expectancy has been extended by at least 20 years beyond working age for most people in Australia, with both negative and positive implications.

The negative implications, which appear to underpin the approach of modern governments, focus on the increased cost to society and the public purse of medical services for older people, aged care and social welfare payments. Some attention is given to retention of older workers in the work force, and belatedly, issues such as age discrimination and elder abuse.

But these issues, while expensive, are not typical of all retired or semi-retired citizens, and are not relevant to all Third Agers. Stereotyping of age has led to a perception that ageing is a burden, undermining the sense of self worth. In her recent book *In Praise of Ageing*, Patricia Edgar comments:

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The main mantra of the media is: ‘Now that they are living longer we can’t afford them: they are going to get sick and be a drain on the rest of society’ While this myth is gathering momentum, there is another side to the story... Older people are enjoying their lives and continuing to contribute, but often in ways that our economic system does not recognise. Not everyone will reach this stage of life or be fit enough to enjoy it, but this is the trend.¹

This paper focuses on the positive implications of the Third Age – enabling older people to maintain independence, active and healthy ageing, social interaction and brain maintenance, through the provision of lifelong learning opportunities and social engagement in a community context.

2. THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

The age of retirement is not a fixed chronological age, although it is often related to the opportunity to qualify for a government sponsored age pension or a superannuation pension. In Australia that can mean any age between 55 (when superannuation pensions can be accessed) or 65 (when the age pension can be accessed, to be increased to 67 by 2023). Pension age of 65 for males and 60 for females was introduced in 1908, when life expectancy at the time was 55.2 years for males and 58.4 years for females. In 1901, only 4% of the population was aged 65 or older. By 2009, male life expectancy in Australia had increased to 79.3 years, and for females to 83.9 years.² The years of ‘retirement’ can now be anything up to 20 years and beyond. By 2014, 14% of the Australian population was aged 65 or older, and is projected to increase to 25% by 2050.

Improvements in sanitation and water supply, standards of education, advances in medical science and technology, and health education have all contributed to extension of life expectancy. However, as longevity increases, there has been an increase in heart disease, stroke, disability, cancer and dementia in older people, as the exigencies of life and lifestyle.

An ageing population also creates new commercial opportunities for physical exercise, entertainment and social engagement. Advertisements for travel and entertainment for Over-50s, health and disability aids, and funeral packages abound in the print and broadcasting media, especially for ‘Baby Boomers’ as they enter the Third Age. All Third Agers’ ability to participate in these opportunities and services

¹ P. EDGAR, *In Praise of Ageing*, Melbourne (Australia) 2013, at p. 8.

² Source. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) *Life Expectancy Trends – Australia*, accessed at (cat.no. 4102.0 - 2011). These figures do not apply to Australian Indigenous people, whose life expectancies are 20 years lower, but that is another story.

will be dependant upon their financial position. But for many older people, even in Australia, the Third Age can be a time of low income and loneliness. In 2013-14, an estimated \$39.5 billion was spent on the Age Pension, benefitting 2.4 million recipients, approximately 10% of the total population.³

In response, governments at all levels have adopted policies to meet both the negative and positive aspects of ageing. Australia as a federation has three levels of government – the national Commonwealth level, State government, and local government. In the past two decades, both Commonwealth and State governments have introduced ministerial portfolios and departments for Ageing or Aged Care, to develop policies and programs to meet the challenges of an ageing population.

The Productivity Commission Report, *Caring for Older Australians* (2011) made several recommendations for government to adopt policies to promote independence, quality care and improved access to community based and residential services.

In 2011, a major inquiry conducted on behalf of the Commonwealth Government by an independent Advisory Panel on the Economic Potential of Senior Australians⁴ produced 36 recommendations for government acknowledgement and policy to support opportunities for older Australians to participate productively in society. The primary recommendation was

‘The development of a national framework to recognise the life course approach to Active Ageing, based of World Health Organisation Active Ageing Principles and including wellness, age-friendly environments, availability and accessibility of effective health care, and active participation in all aspects of community life.’

Specific Recommendations related to housing, participation in employment, lifelong learning, health, age discrimination, and volunteering, adoption of a whole-of-government approach and embedding active ageing by allowing people to realise their potential for physical, social and mental wellbeing, as a framework for future policy development. Successive governments have adopted their own policy frameworks according to their own priorities.

Government attitudes to such reports varies. Some governments have approached the ageing of the population as a ‘whole-of-government’ issue to encompass all aspects of government services which require special attention to the needs of older citizens, while others limit the field to the economic issues of the costs of health services and dependency based aged care, and encouraging mature age employment.

³ National Commission of Audit, Towards Responsible Government, Section 7.1, 2014, accessed at www.ncoa.gov.au/report/phase-one/part-b/7-1-age-pension.html.

⁴ B HOWE, G. LEWIN, E.R. COMPTON, *Third Report on the Economic Potential of Senior Australians Final Report: Turning Grey Into Gold*, 2011. Available for download from epsa.treasury.gov.au/content/publications/grey_gold/downloads/grey_gold.pdf.

At the national level, the Australian government has constitutional power and practical authority for the provision of disability and aged pensions, and pharmaceutical and hospital benefits (known as Medicare). While hospitals are the primary responsibility of the States, the Commonwealth can and does provide substantial financial contribution to health and aged care. Government spending on aged care is currently .08% of GDP and expected to rise to 1.8% by 2050. Current policy is to encourage older people to remain independently in their own homes as long as practicable, supported by home care facilities and personnel, and advisory services on adapting for their changing needs as older people.

On the positive side, governments have also adopted policies and programs designed to encourage ‘preventative health’ in people of all ages – immunisation, reduction of smoking and alcohol consumption, healthy diet, participation in sport and regular exercise. If these policies and programs promote healthier lifestyles, the result is healthier physical and mental ageing.

Considerable government support is also given to research into all aspects of ageing, especially brain and dementia research. Dementia as a debilitating illness is becoming more prevalent as the population ages, adding to the cost of maintaining the health system. Dementia is not of itself a normal part of ageing, nor is it inherited, but most causes relate to lifestyle in earlier life stages. This is good reason for governments to embrace the notion of ‘preventative health’ to reduce the incidence of chronic disease, and to support ‘positive ageing’ approaches to encourage independence in older age, in addition to research and support for Alzheimer’s sufferers and their carers⁵.

Governments, particularly at State and local levels, are also beginning to adopt policies to support ‘age-friendly communities’. Several cities have adopted the WHO Guidelines for Age-Friendly Cities, where infrastructure, housing design, transport, community services and community facilities are planned with an ageing population in mind.

3. MAINTAINING POSITIVE AGEING AND LEARNING THE THIRD AGE

A key aspect of brain health or decline is the link between blood flow and brain function. Another is social isolation and loneliness, leading to depression, itself a factor in dementia. Research over several decades, internationally and in Australia⁶, has

⁵ Alzheimers Australia Media Releases, *Dementia should be an Election Priority*, May 2016; *Preventative Health Policy Welcomed*, 20 June 2016; at www.fightdementia.org.au.

⁶ M. VALENZUELA, *Maintain Your Brain*, Sydney: ABC Books 2011.

recognised the importance of healthy diets, regular physical and mental exercise, and social interaction as vital elements of lifestyle especially in the Third Age to prevent depression, and prevent or defer dementia in older age, and to promote ‘positive’ ageing. The remainder of this paper describes significant developments in Australia which have contributed to the promotion of positive ageing in the Third Age.

4. ‘STAYING CONNECTED’

Older age can also mean social isolation, especially for people living alone. The Australian population is concentrated in urban areas⁷, 70% in the eight capital cities. In 2014, the median age of Australians was 37.3 years, but younger in all capitals except Hobart, Tasmania. In contrast, the older median ages were in coastal areas where there is a concentration of retirees seeking warmer climates and simpler lifestyles. Whereas people over the age of 65 are currently 14% of the total population, that cohort in the coastal ‘retirement belt’ is considerably higher, and in many small inland towns can be as high as 25%. This can lead to social isolation, loneliness and depression, which itself can be a factor in the onset of dementia in older people, especially those who live alone on their later years.

Modern communication technology provides ready access to the wider world, as well as social interaction, through important tools to counter these effects. But the pace and complexity of technological advances can be intimidating to older people, and government and independent not-for-profit associations have developed programs to encourage and support their access to and adoption of digital inclusion and computer literacy.

In 2008, the Commonwealth Government initiated ‘Broadband for Seniors’⁸ in association with an internet technology company and adult community education providers to establish local community kiosks in premises such as community centres, libraries, seniors citizens clubs and some retirement villages. The program provides free access to computers, the internet and training given by volunteer tutors, on topics such as how to email, access and research on the internet, Skype, and how to stay safe online. There are over 2000 such kiosks across the country, and over 650,000 people over the age of 50 have utilised the service.

⁷ Source – Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Population by Age and Sex, Regions of Australia, 2014 accessed at www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.../6D29D79856AA107ECA257BD60010DD6C? (cat no. 4102.0).

⁸ At www.broadbandforseniors.com.au.

The New South Wales, Victorian and Queensland state governments, in association with a major telco, have also provided online and DVD programs known as 'Tech Savvy Seniors' to assist older people to develop the skills and confidence to use computers and other digital devices.

The Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association (ASCCA)⁹ established in 1998, is a not-for-profit community based company which supports computer clubs which encourage older people to become computer literate at their own pace, to learn about computer technology, and thus to engage in the digital world of learning and social media. ASCCA undertakes projects to support IT for Seniors, and organises seminars, training sessions for the mature aged and club volunteers, workshops and similar activities. In addition, there is an annual two day conference, open to all seniors, where many areas of information technology and communications issues of interest to seniors are covered.

5. THE 'THIRD AGE' AND LIFE LONG LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

All humans continue to learn throughout their lives, by virtue of human nature, but specifically targeted learning is dependent on individual needs and interests. Leaving aside learning for the purpose of upgrading work skills, or engaging in part-time employment, Third Agers have the opportunity and time to continue to learn new things for its own sake.

It is not surprising therefore that many Third Agers want to continue to learn new things in order to maintain their ability to live fruitful lives in a world that is constantly changing. Continuing to learn, especially in the company of like-minded people, provides a sense of purpose and a comfortable social environment, factors which research has shown exercise the brain and strengthen the connections between them, the neurological benefits of which can assist in staving off depression and dementia.¹⁰

6. THE U3A MOVEMENT IN AUSTRALIA

The U3A movement had its origins in university-based summer schools for older people, founded by Professor Pierre Vellas in Toulouse in 1972. The concept has since spread throughout the world in various formats.

⁹ At www.accsa.org.au.

¹⁰ M. VALENZUELA, *Maintain Your Brain*, especially Chapter 10; Alzheimers Australia, *Mental Exercise and Dementia, Fact Sheet No.6* downloadable from www.fightdementia.org.au.

U3A began in Australia in 1984, adopting the ‘Cambridge’ model co-founded by Dr Peter Laslett in Britain. In this model, U3A groups are community-based, not-for-profit groups, which aim to provide affordable learning opportunities for Third Agers using the skills, experience, knowledge and abilities of the members themselves, in accordance with the Laslett principle: *Those who teach shall also learn - and those who learn shall also teach.*

U3A combines opportunities for mental stimulation, physical activity and social interaction. U3As provide the opportunity to continue to learn about topics of personal interest, to develop new skills, and to share expertise and experience with others willing to learn from each other. Learning takes place in a friendly, supportive environment. There are no academic qualifications to join, no exams or assignments to pass, and no awards. U3A is learning for its own sake. The ages of participants range from 50 to 90, with the bulk of members in age from their mid-60s to 80. Informal continuing education for older people in association with their peers can be liberating, encouraging a sense of belonging to the wider world.

In 2008, a research team led by Dr Richard Swindell conducted a survey of U3As in Australia and New Zealand, which revealed a profile of a growing movement which

... quietly provided many, very-low-cost opportunities for members to take part in most or all of the successful ageing activities that are associated with continued independence in later life... Few organisations for retirees can point to a similar range of mentally, physically and socially stimulating courses, and the wide variety of volunteering opportunities provided by most U3As¹¹.

Hidden in that statement are real life stories of the benefits so many have derived from participation in U3A. U3A members come from all walks of life and educational backgrounds. One man who had worked all his working life with an international tractor company was bored early in retirement and fortunately joined a U3A creative writing group. He blossomed as a writer drawing on his rich range of life experiences and ultimately had several short stories published by national magazines. A woman who had achieved much as a folk singer joined a U3A group – while it took some time for her colleagues to “discover” her talents and experience as a singer, she now leads a music group at the U3A. Another who was an exercise trainer contributed her professional experience to make a DVD of a light exercise ‘balance and bones’ strengthening program which has been distributed to many U3As and individual U3A members by the New South Wales (NSW) U3A Network.

¹¹ R. SWINDELL et al, *Universities of The Third Age in Australia and New Zealand 2008: Capitalising on the Cognitive Resources of Older Volunteers*, „Aust Journal On Ageing”, 2008, V. 30, № 4, p. 200.

A 'Brain Games Project', similarly designed by a U3A member, has been made available for distribution to U3A groups. The range of interests of Third Agers, and the talents of Third Agers to teach these interests, have great potential. And there are many members who have lost their life partners who find friendship and support through their U3A group.

Today (2016) there are over 300 U3A groups, with a combined total of about 100,000 members, in Australia, and growing. About 40% of U3A members live within the capital cities of Australia, but the remaining 60% live in regional or rural areas, where up to 40% of the population is over the age of 50, resources are more limited, and distances between townships can be several hours' travel. So while U3A groups are independent and autonomous, in five of Australia's six States, they are connected through incorporated 'Networks' which provide services such as Public Liability insurance, advice and support on promotion and publicity, and exchanging information and experience through annual conferences. The NSW U3A Network maintains a Resource Library of course material prepared and donated by its members for the use of other U3As. The Australian Capital Territory has a single U3A of over 5,500 members. U3As in Tasmania, the smallest State, maintain informal networking between themselves and with interstate U3As.

Each U3A group is autonomous, and responsible for its own expenses, usually met from individual membership fees. Annual subscription rates vary, but average A\$40 to A\$50 per member. Some of the State Networks have received grants from State governments, but these are minor contributions, often one-off funding, usually applied towards the promotion and expansion of the U3A movement rather than to administrative costs. Administration of both the Networks and their member U3As is carried out by volunteers.

The curriculum of each U3A group is determined by the needs and preferences of its members and the resources available to it. Within this framework, groups can teach and learn about Art, Astronomy, Aboriginal Culture, Literature, History, Geology, Astronomy, Music Appreciation, Film Appreciation, Languages, Economics, Law and Science. Skills, arts and crafts offered include music and dance, yoga, tai chi, creative writing, painting and drawing, photography, quilting and embroidery and computer technology. Current Affairs, Philosophy and other discussion groups are popular. Excursions are arranged. Light exercise, tai chi, yoga, bushwalking, and cycling provide physical exercise. Course leaders and co-ordinators are volunteers.

U3A members are also encouraged to participate in research programs conducted by university researchers into ageing and older people's health. Many do so, in online surveys, interviews, and in some instances as simulated 'patients' for medical students.

Over time, U3A has engaged with the wider community. U3As have developed relationships with local Councils and retirement villages, local newspapers, radio and television stations, and other older age group organisations in their localities. The State Networks are building relationships with other State and national organisations with similar or complementary agendas.

The Networks have formed U3A Alliance Australia, the deliberations of which essentially conducted through electronic meetings, for the purposes of sharing information, and making submissions on national issues where relevant.

U3A Online¹² is a 'virtual' U3A which offers courses online to individuals as well as to U3A groups which subscribe to it. It currently has about 1100 members in Australia, as well as some international members.

Odyssey Travel¹³ is a not-for-profit organisation, which was founded in 1983 by a group of member universities in Australia to provide educational travel opportunities for mature aged (generally between 50 and 75) and essentially retired people. It pre-dates the U3A movement, but its founders were closely associated with the beginnings of U3A in New South Wales and the organisation continues to offer sponsorship of U3A conferences and other activities nation-wide. It mainly offers small group tours 'for the mature traveller to every continent offering educational, heritage and cultural experiences, with like-minded companions'.

The **Men's Sheds** movement has been developed over the last ten years, as a means of providing a place for men to meet, work on projects and talk together about things of mutual interest. The Australian Men's Sheds Association (AMSA) recognizes and describes a Men's Shed as "*any community-based, non-profit, non-commercial organization that is accessible to all men and whose primary activity is the provision of a safe, friendly and healing environment where men are able to work on meaningful projects at their own pace in their own time in the company of other men*"¹⁴. A major objective of AMSA is to advance the well-being and health of men and to encourage social inclusion. It receives substantial funding from the Australian government, to provide support for existing and new sheds, training and administration of the peak body, including 5 full-time employees. The organisation now has over 930 Men's Sheds representing an estimated 150,000 individuals.

While Men's Sheds are not age specific, the majority of men who join one are over 50 and retired, and teach and learn woodworking and metalworking skills from each other, often also contributing to community projects involving the production of furniture and children's toys, or repairs to other community buildings.

¹² At www.u3aonline.org.au.

¹³ At www.odysseytravel.com.au/.

¹⁴ At www.mensshed.org.

The *Australian Centre for Arts and Health* (ACAH) is a not-for-profit health promotion charity which promotes the relationship between the arts and creative expression, and cognitive health and quality of life. It especially promotes national and international co-operative research on the importance of music therapy, dance and art in providing stimulating activities, meaning and quality of life to people with intellectual disability and dementia sufferers¹⁵.

National Seniors Australia is a commercially based Seniors organisation, offering club-like activities and discounts on products for older age (over 50) citizens. It also hosts the National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre¹⁶, in association with the Commonwealth Department of Social Services, with grants to researchers to advance knowledge and understanding into all aspects of productive ageing to improve the quality of life of people aged 50 and over. It's broad research purpose is to 'emphasise the positives of ageing and an ageing society, as well as flag the challenges'.

7. VOLUNTEERING

Volunteering is defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as relating to people 'who willingly give unpaid help in the form of time, service or skills through an organisation or group'.

In the 2011 census, 36.2% of Australians over the age of 18 participated in formal volunteering. Of these, 31% gave their occupation as 'Retired'. Additionally, 43% of people in the age group 55-64 years, and 31% in the age group 65+, participated in volunteering activities. While this was more than younger groups (other than the 45-54 cohort at 44%) the figures reflect the point that older people are more likely to have time available to undertake voluntary activity, but are also highly motivated to do so.

The range of volunteer activities is very broad, and the number of hours individual volunteers contribute is also varied. However, the average number of hours contributed annually by older people is significant: The 55-64 age group contributed 80 hours, the 65-75 age group 104 hours, and the 75-84 age group also 104 hours. The economic value of volunteer time is incalculable in the absence of a benchmark for value, although some estimates suggest the value may be as much as A\$200 billion per annum.

Most volunteering is done for not-for-profit community based organisations, of which there are 600,000 in Australia, two-thirds of which do not have any paid employees.

¹⁵ At www.artsandhealth.org.au.

¹⁶ At www.nationalseniors.com.au/be-informed/research.

Of equal, if not more, importance than the economic value, is the value of volunteering to the volunteer and community spirit. Volunteering has been found to builds collective efficacy by bestowing a sense of altruism and citizenship; developing political and negotiation skills; and inspiring people to work together to solve problems and take action to improve community life¹⁷.

Volunteering is highly associated with health and happiness as positive traits in volunteers¹⁸. A strong correlation exists between the well-being, happiness, health, and longevity of people who are emotionally kind and compassionate in their charitable helping activities. The experience of helping others provides meaning, a sense of self-worth, a social role and health enhancement.

8. CONCLUSION

Of the 14% of Australians aged 65 and over, for the greater majority, ageing is still a positive experience, countering the negative stereotypes that are drawn from the statistics for the cost of pensions, aged care and health. Most live independently and engage in their communities, contributing an economic and social value that is not generally acknowledged, through grandparenting, volunteerism, and maintaining their physical and mental wellbeing.

What is evident now is that most people are living more productive older lives than fifty, or even twenty, years ago. The issue now is not so much how long people live and work but rather the quality of their lives. Lifelong learning is the key to fulfilment.

“Ageing is not lost youth but a new stage for opportunity and strength” – Betty Freidan

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¹⁷ Volunteering Australia, *Key Facts about Volunteering in Australia*, 2015, accessed at www.volunteeringaustralia.org.

¹⁸ Ibid.

OBRAZ KSZTAŁCENIA USTAWICZNEGO W UNIWERSYTETACH
TRZECIEGO WIEKU W AUSTRALII

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Niniejszy artykuł opisuje kontekst demograficzny starzenia się społeczeństwa w Australii, reakcję rządu na problem starzenia się społeczeństwa oraz dostępne możliwości w zakresie pozytywnego podejścia do procesu starzenia się i kształcenia ustawicznego. Szczególnym zainteresowaniem cieszy się rozwój tzw. ruchu Uniwersytetu Trzeciego Wieku (U3A) w Australii oraz szeroki zakres wolontariatu osób starszych.

Słowa kluczowe: pozytywne podejście do starzenia się; U3A; wolontariat.

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S u m m a r y

This paper describes the demographic context of ageing in Australia, government responses, and the opportunities available for positive ageing and lifelong learning. Of particular interest is the growth of the University of the Third Age (U3A) movement in Australia, and the extent of older persons' volunteerism.

Key words: positive ageing; U3A; volunteering.