

## **A little bit of background to the International U3A**

Very different approaches to the U3A have been adopted by a number of countries around the world. The original French U3A required them to be associated with traditional university systems. The British U3A, which developed some years later, is mostly a self-help membership with little or no support from external sources.

The U3A was established in France in 1968 at the time when legislation was passed requiring Universities to provide more community education. In 1973 a course was run by Toulouse University of Social Sciences exclusively for local retired people and this led to the formation of the first U3A. The U3A was open to anyone over retirement age; no qualifications or examinations were required or offered and fees were kept to a minimum.

By 1975 the idea had spread to other French universities as well as to universities in Belgium, Switzerland, Poland, Italy, Spain and across the Atlantic to Sherbrooke in Quebec and San Diego in California.

Different U3A approaches began to develop by the late 1970s, even within France, including several which were a direct creation of local government and not connected with a university. Courses vary widely in content, style of presentation and format. They are a mixture of lectures, study groups, workshops, excursions and talks.

U3A underwent a substantial change when it reached Cambridge in 1981. Rather than relying on university good will the founders of the British U3A adopted an approach in which there was to be no distinction between the teachers and the taught. Members would be the teachers as well as the learners and, where possible, members should engage in research activities. The "self-help" ideal was based on the knowledge that experts of every kind retire.

The self-help approach has been highly successful in Britain as well as in other countries such as Australia and New Zealand. Some of the strengths of the approach include: minimal membership fees; accessible classes run in community halls, libraries, private homes and schools. There is a wide course variety ranging from the highly academic to arts, crafts and physical activity. This gives us all the opportunity to mix with alert like-minded people who enjoy doing new things. Each U3A is independent and is run by an elected management committee of members.

By the start of 1994, total membership in some 240 U3As in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland was over 32,000. Group membership ranges from 20 to more than 1000.

If you want to read more about this then I recommend <http://worldu3a.org> this is the site that I read to extract the above information. It is a huge web site and itemises several countries.

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