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Summary The successful U3A Online model uses the internet to link expert volunteers from a number of countries to improve the quality of life of older people who are isolated by circumstance. This submission highlights to the Commission that retired older people are an untapped reservoir of expertise whose skills, experience and general understanding of the exigencies of older age can be effectively harnessed via the internet for the “greater good”.

Volunteering and later life learning are good for older persons’ health

In 2003 the contributions made by Australian volunteers aged 65 years and older to the greater good were calculated to be worth nearly \$39 billion (de Vaus, Gray & Stanton, 2003). The process of volunteering also benefits volunteers as well as recipients of voluntary activities. Zedlewski and Butrica (2007) summarised the outcomes of 10 international studies published since 1999 that documented the significant positive associations between activities carried out by older volunteers and decreased mortality and depression, improved health and strength, greater happiness, and enhanced cognitive ability. Recent Australian studies show that baby boomers will continue the volunteering trend of earlier cohorts (Salt & Mikkelsen, 2009; Warburton & McDonald, 2009; Warburton, Paynter & Petriwskyj, 2007). This suggests that a growing population of older volunteers is likely to parallel Australia’s rapidly ageing population.

The process of volunteering helps maintain the health status of older people. So too does keeping the mind active. In 2008 *The Foresight Project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing* took a whole-of-life approach in reaching its conclusion that countries must learn how to capitalize on their citizens’ cognitive resources if they are to prosper. More than 450 experts and stakeholders from 16 countries were involved in the review of state-of-the-art scientific and other evidence to investigate the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in the next 20 years. The recommendations regarding older learners were noteworthy. The study recommended that “*as people move into older age, learning should be encouraged and actively promoted, as this can protect against cognitive decline*” (p. 1058).

For nearly 12 years U3A Online has demonstrated an internet-based model in which the skills of retired volunteers and younger disabled volunteers, regardless of where they live, are adapted for online delivery to improve the quality-of-life of isolated older people, regardless of where they live.

Comments in this submission are among scores of unsolicited comments that can be read on www.u3aonline.org.au

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I am partially blind with limited short sight. I am extremely grateful to U3A Online as I now have an interest at home - am happy working on my own and life has again a meaning.

The U3A Online model

The world-first virtual U3A, U3A Online, began in 1998 with a \$120,000 grant from the Australian Government as part of its commitment to the International Year of Older Persons. Since 2001 it has been an entirely volunteer-based organisation. All volunteers have been recruited from the virtual world. No one is paid. Since 2001 Griffith University has provided substantial in-kind support to U3A Online as part of its commitment to the wider community, including free hosting and free course delivery. (Note: U3A Online courses are not university courses; they are adult education courses. There are no awards, no exams, and no entry requirements. Learning is for the love and benefits of learning and serves as the focus for like minded people to interact with each other.)

Experts of all kinds retire. These experts are the volunteers worldwide who underpin the U3A Online model and provide meaning and value to the lives of U3A Online members. It is difficult to imagine a more empowering, low cost approach for opening new opportunities for volunteering, learning new things and forming new social networks with like-minded others.

Being able to sit at my computer and download the tutorials to read at a later date is a real help. There are many days when pain stops me from doing much at all and if I had to travel to attend a class then I would not be able to do so.

Resources

- **Courses.** To date there are 37 U3A Online courses and others in various stages of development all written and taught by volunteers from a number of countries (Attachment C). A sample of comments from socially isolated people (Attachment A) and from members who have formed new virtual social networks (Attachment B) show that the quality of life experienced by isolated older people has been substantially improved through participation in our courses.

Our all-volunteer model with university support has no costly overheads. Consequently the annual membership fees are a nominal \$25. This annual fee entitles members to free 365 day access to all courses in self-paced mode and free access to all other resources such as mini courses run via wikis. Members pay an additional \$5 to take part in the remotely tutored courses.

- **Broadband for Seniors.** In 2008 U3A Online was one of four partner organisations that won the \$15 million Australian Government Broadband for Seniors tender. From 2009-2011 the project's aim is to provide up to 2000 Internet kiosks throughout Australia, specifically for seniors. An ACMA study (2008) showed that 87% of all Australians aged 14 and over have used the Internet. *Of the 13% who have not used the Internet, 47% are aged 65 and older.* The Broadband for Seniors project will help redress this imbalance by providing many low cost opportunities for older disabled people and their carers to broaden their horizons via the Internet. U3A Online membership is offered to Broadband for Seniors participants as a meaningful and safe medium through which they can utilise their new-found internet skills.
- **Queensland Smart Home Initiative (QSHI).** U3A Online is a member of QSHI management team. Smart home demonstrators, such as those developed by QSHI, display a wide variety of assistive technologies that illustrate how frail or disabled older persons can be helped to retain their independence in their own homes.

U3A Online is a smart assistive technology for helping isolated older people keep their minds active, learn new things and develop new virtual social networks. U3A Online could be inexpensively incorporated into the suite of assistive technologies that are available to help older or disabled people to retain their independence in new or retro fitted "smart homes".

(QSHI is the subject of separate submissions to the Productivity Commission.)

Some broader possibilities for the U3A Online model

- **CALD seniors** In 2003/2004 U3A Online worked with a senior's organisation in Germany to translate one of its courses into German for online delivery. The intended outcome was a virtual course that would serve as a focus for older German volunteers from anywhere and the wider Australian German community to network with each other. The course was translated by volunteers but U3A Online was unable to link any of Australia's older Germans with their counterparts in Germany at that time. The principal reasons for not making these links were a lack of funds to advertise the project and too few older people in either country with the requisite internet skills to take advantage of the service. Generational change and programs like Broadband for Seniors in Australia, will help to overcome the lack of internet skills by isolated older people.

The National Broadband Network could become a pipeline to enable rapid virtual communication and resource transfer between older CALD Australians and overseas counterparts. In multicultural Australia, increasing numbers of older migrants are likely to become socially isolated in their homes. Many CALD families in Australia do not regularly speak English at home. As migrants with poor command of English age they tend to revert to their native language.

The U3A Online approach suggests a relatively inexpensive intervention for helping older migrants to form new, meaningful virtual social networks with native speakers.

- **Social networking** Face Book, Twitter, Skype, wikis and Google are among recent free internet-based innovations that are rapidly transforming society. U3A Online is in the process of rebuilding its membership site to enable the use of these and other free social networking resources to increase the number and range of new learning possibilities and virtual networks that members can learn to use safely.

One envisioned U3A Online approach will be to increase intergenerational interaction by inviting younger disabled people, many of whom are expert with computers, to lead new activities.

Conclusion

The U3A Online approach has been somewhat ahead of its time in that older Australians have only recently begun to discover the empowering nature of the internet. Baby boomers have indicated their interest in volunteering when they retire and they herald the beginning of a wave of new retirees who routinely use the internet in daily life and who will continue to do so when they retire.

For 11 years U3A Online has demonstrated how expert virtual volunteers can very inexpensively assist in meeting some of the needs of sectors of the ageing community, particularly those who are isolated by circumstance. As argued earlier, volunteers, recipients of volunteers' expertise and wider society all benefit from volunteering.

It is our belief that the U3A Online model can be applied to match the skills and interests of many volunteers with the needs of increasing numbers of internet-savvy older Australians to help them retain their independence. All parties stand to benefit.

A number of peer reviewed studies that explain the broader U3A movement in Australia and which elaborate specifically on U3A Online activities can be downloaded from www.u3aonline.org.au

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Attachment A

Comments related to social isolation

- I'll go as far as to say that being totally absorbed in my most recent online course has saved my sanity this year.
- I feel as though I belong to something to keep my mind off my pain, also helps keep my brain working.
- I am partially blind with limited short sight. I am extremely grateful to U3A as I now have an interest at home - am happy working on my own and life has again a meaning.
- I care for my wife who has Alzheimers. Have done so for the last 8 years.
- I am a self-funded retiree caring for my wife with [dementia]. Because of her condition I am with her constantly and generally confined to home.
- I am deaf – communicating online is wonderful for me. I am sure that is true for other people with disabilities of many kinds.
- I have to devote a lot of my time to looking after my wife who will be 90 years of age in November. I enjoyed being able to work at my own speed and time
- Nowadays, living alone and physically limited, I was being stupefied by knitting, crochet, patchwork, computer puzzles and occasional bus trips. There is a limit.
- I live in (suburb of large city) with bad bus service. Have no family support. Have become more disabled and in constant pain over the last couple of years.
- I live in a large city. Because I never know how I am going to feel from day to day my health stops me committing myself to a set routine like going to class.
- When I eventually retired I discovered U3A ONLINE which seemed an excellent way of keeping the mind active. I have found it is a lot more. Each unit I have undertaken has pointed me in so many different directions with their links to related URLs. They have also brought me into virtual contact with a whole range of different people so that I now have contacts across the globe and literally in my own suburb.
- I enjoy these courses. They provide the stimulation of learning as well as allow interaction with other like minded people. Interaction on this level is limited in isolated areas and situations. I have felt this communication has enriched the quality of my present life
- Time spent studying and reading etc relieves the loneliness and boredom due health and lack of transport problems. Gave me a reason to keep going on my own. If mind is stimulated and one is doing something enjoyable other restraints become bearable. And time passes more pleasantly and quicker. It helps relieve depression and lessens time wasted on introspection.
- Being able to sit at my computer and download the tutorials to read at a later date is a real help. There are many days when pain stops me from doing much at all and if I had to travel to attend a class then I would not be able to do so.
- I do not mind being an on line learner. We live in a small town and as we are unable to get out very much, this is a wonderful way for me to be in contact with the rest of the family and I feel I have the world at my fingertips. So isolation is not really a problem. I do enjoy the courses and will enrol in future ones. Thanks very much, I had a great time.
- (*Other adult education*) classes are rather expensive for a pensioner. With the online courses I can organize my time for myself, in between grandson babysitting!
- Being able to sit at my computer and download the tutorials to read at a later date is a real help. There are many days when pain stops me from doing much at all and if I had to travel to attend a class then I would not be able to do so.
- I have no problems studying on my own as opposed to a classroom situation. Some days pain is too much to even be bothered going online. If not for U3A Online, studying would be difficult & without supervision lots of time & money would be wasted trying to access relevant & reliable data. I hope to keep on studying online as long as possible.

- ❖ I thoroughly enjoy being part of an on-line group sharing a similar interest. It is especially good when participants keep in contact after the course is finished.
- ❖ I like to hear of other people who are doing the course and through it have made e-mail contact with people all over the world. This helps to keep me busy.
- ❖ I enjoy these courses. They provide the stimulation of learning as well as allow interaction with other like minded people. Interaction on this level is limited in isolated areas and situations. I have felt this communication has enriched the quality of my present life
- ❖ I enjoy communicating with other members. One has become a good online friend. As an observer I miss that but I do appreciate the opportunity to access Course Units at will.
- ❖ Even as an observer I feel reassured that help or advice is only an email away and that reduces any sense of loneliness.
- ❖ I love "virtual meeting" people from other regions, walks of life, with different viewpoints
- ❖ I enjoy the feeling of learning and being a part of a group. It's like meeting old friends when familiar names crop up in other courses. The discussion forum is interesting even though comments do not always respond to the points others have made. I am really enjoying ongoing contact with one participant.
- ❖ I missed people who did not respond for a couple of weeks, and when they returned with explanations about where they had been or what had happened to them, it was like greeting old friends again.
- ❖ I have found the three courses that I have undertaken to be of very rewarding. The information has been presented beautifully. Congratulations to all those who worked so hard behind the scenes. As a novice computer operator I have found access technically friendly. A huge plus. The content of courses has been excellent and the tutors very approachable.
- ❖ I am mostly not able to keep to set lecture times because of family caring commitments. It is great to be able to work online at your own available time schedule, and at your own pace. A feeling of independent living follows. I thoroughly enjoy being part of a group. I find it hard to explain to others who do not understand a love of learning. Learning carries with it a need to discuss and share. U3A Online provides that.
- ❖ I belong to a country U3A which only has one study group ...I enjoyed doing this course as part of a study group. We swapped so much information web sites etc. It also improved our computer skills. We also enjoyed the social experience, finishing up with a white afternoon tea!
- ❖ When I eventually retired I discovered U3A Online which seemed an excellent way of keeping the mind active. I have found it is a lot more. Each unit I have undertaken has pointed me in so many different directions with their links to related URLs. They have also brought me into virtual contact with a whole range of different people so that I now have contacts across the globe and literally in my own suburb.
- ❖ I have made contact with some great people in other parts of Australia, people I would never have met had I not been online. Knowing that there are others out there who are interested in learning about the same subject as myself and sharing information is great. The subject matter in each course that I have participated in has been fascinating, as have the different websites that we have been recommended to use.
- ❖ It is good to be able to choose whether to study as an interactive group member or on my own. I have enjoyed (and still am enjoying) the personal contacts I have made through U3Aonline courses. I have made several really good friends in this way and have regular contact with at least four of them in Australia and England.
- ❖ Via the internet we are never really alone as we would be for instance if we just borrowed books from the library, took them home and had no one to discuss them with. We are able to "meet" people who we would never have met had we gone to formal classes in our own area, for instance, people who may live on the other side of the country or even the world. What a wonderful way of learning about people from other cultures and how they live.
- ❖ There is no other place I know that offers a short course on the subject I chose and on top of it in English! Wonderful!
- ❖ On-line courses satisfy not only the needs of those who are mobility challenged but also those with random schedules which preclude them from attending a regularly scheduled class. The Forums and other e-mail exchanges encouraged in this class were an added bonus.

Attachment C

U3A Online courses

All courses have been written and are taught by retired experts. The courses are run in two modes:

- 1. With Course Leader:** In this mode each unit of the 8-week long courses is released automatically by the Griffith University Blackboard course delivery software. Participants interact with their colleagues and their course leader by electronic forum or email. This methodology has resulted in many new enduring friendships being formed between participants from different countries and regions who may never meet. The comments indicate that virtual learning communities are being created. (Attachment B)
- 2. Independent Study:** Each of the courses is available for independent study 365 days a year. Many participants prefer to learn this way because they want greater time and freedom to explore the many links introduced throughout the course materials. Most course leaders are happy to receive and respond to emails from the independent learners throughout the year.

➤ Courses written and taught by U3A Online members

37 courses are currently available; others are in various stages of completion

<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Ageing and Retirement➤ Antarctica➤ Astronomy➤ Australian Flora➤ Australian History 1➤ Autobiography and Journaling➤ Basic English Grammar➤ Botany for Knowledge and Enjoyment➤ China in Transition: From Mao to Now➤ Continents on the Move➤ Design in Your Life➤ Food for Thought➤ Genealogy Online➤ Human Biology➤ Introduction to Western Philosophy➤ Left, Right or Centre: A very brief introduction to political ideologies➤ Maintaining Independence➤ The story of science – the emergence of natural philosophy➤ The story of science – the science disciplines	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ My Life Story➤ Myths and Legends➤ Practical Psychology for Relationships➤ Religions of the World➤ Renaissance Italy➤ Resources for the Future – Renewable and Non-Polluting➤ Saving the Soil➤ Storytelling with Pictures➤ The Evolution of life on Planet Earth➤ The History and Spread of the English Language➤ The Night Sky➤ The Northern Sky➤ The Romans➤ The Shaping of the Modern Mind➤ Thoreau Emerson and the Conduct of Life➤ Unleashing Your Creative Spirit➤ Writing Family History➤ Writing for Pleasure
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