

U3A National Conference September 2009

Introduction

The conference took place from 2nd to the 5th September 2009 at the Heriot Watt University on the outskirts of Edinburgh. . John Fitzpatrick (Chairman), and Jeff Staniforth (Vice - Chairman went from Chichester U3A and held voting rights.

The theme for the conference was 'Changing Expectations of Life.' There was a great deal of opportunity to see some of Edinburgh as well as meeting many of the 300+ people attending. This conference was the first to be organised by the U3A itself by staff based at the headquarters in Bromley, Kent.

A difficulty was not having a room large enough to have all attendees present -another lecture theatre was used with a video link so people could hear and see but not speak. At the opening talk and presentations the link was broken more than half a dozen times with technicians running around attempting to fix the problem.

The conference included guided walks, tours, talks, speakers, seminars and discussions. Days began at 8am with breakfast and went on until 10pm after entertainment at 8pm each night.

The entertainment was much appreciated by those attending.

Jeff and John shared the attendance at seminars and more formal sessions so that we were able to meet and contribute to as many group discussions as possible. Both attended the AGM.

Speakers

We had a number of guest speakers on a variety topics including:

Professor Tom Kirkwood from Newcastle University who spoke on the topic of 'Changing Expectations of Life' He explained how he and his colleagues at the Institute for Ageing and Health are spearheading attempts too ensure that as people live ever longer and longer these extra years of life are as high quality as possible.

A good book –A Time to Die. -Humans are programmed to survive and we should all attempt to achieve 'healthy and independent living'

Professor Felicia Huppert from Cambridge University where she works on Research into Ageing. She spoke about well being across all of our lives and the results of her research on mental wellbeing. She was keen to explain about Positive Ageing along with the role of the individual as well as the role of society

Professor Ian Deary from the University of Edinburgh spoke on the topic of 'How intelligence affects life and vice-versa. He explained results of a survey he had undertaken on a cohort of people born in 1921 and results of their 11plus in 1932 and changes in their mental ability aged 70 years

Professor John Field from the University of Stirling spoke about his sociological work linked to his talk on 'Generations, the life course and lifelong learning. He was very complimentary on the way in which U3As operate giving very positive outcomes to so many people.

Seminar 1 Discussions for Chairs and Secretaries

36 people attended a lively discussion led by former national Chairman Len Street

Topics included:

- Succession of officers year on year –how to keep the committee active and using new members on a regular basis
- Involving members in activities-having roles spread across a wide number of people
- Training for post holders
- Involvement in our localities especially with employers including Local Authorities
- Coping with Change-expansion of numbers across the patch
- Buddy Schemes –for new members and new committee members
- Grant Application for computer kit-payment for monthly meetings-lots of success here
- Links with Libraries for books for groups inc reference books
- Presentations by members and groups at monthly meetings e.g. choirs, play readings, poetry
- Actively recruit younger members
- Sharing job descriptions for ‘post-holders’-I have a bundle of these
- Displaying information about the U3A in Council and Libraries
- Value of Coffee mornings
- Hosting two monthly meetings each month to offer more members an opportunity to attend.
- Providing bookmarks to libraries with publicity about our local U3As
- Length of time on a committee-should there be a 5 yr limit?
- Coping with difficult people on committees who scare away potential new volunteers. - Penrith had a huge problem with a difficult committee member .
- What is a good size of local U3A? -Much discussion many thought 300-600 was a ‘cope-able’ number.

Seminar 2 Regional Support for U3As

This again was well attended by 35+people

Discussions took place on how Active sub-regions are involved with

- 1 Events
- 2 Study days
- 3 Website
- 4 Newsletter
- 5 Advice from regional reps
- 6 Summer Schools

U3A expansion has caused friction with the number of regional reps on NEC

Links with neighbouring U3As

Range of options for expansion in regions

Each new U3A has available a start up grant from NEC

Each U3A has operational independence

Our U3A region has 150+ U3As

Role of reps on NEC discussed and amount of time spent with each local U3A

Much discussion on the topic of representation on the NEC from South Region-this was also discussed at the AGM.

Jeff attended 2 seminars on U3A development and Online Courses.

Development

The 3 staff (1 full time and 2 part time) introduced the topic of development by looking at its history, the current picture and future aims. Their work is to achieve aims set by the National Executive Committee (NEC). The overall ambitious target is to more than double our membership within 5 years to 500,000. The current target for this year of 250,000 had fallen short by 20,000 approximately but was still an impressive achievement. It meant that 52 new U3As had been set up in the past year alone.

This rate of expansion needs to continue if targets are to be met.

Much of this growth will continue to come from setting up new U3As in parts of the UK where they are still few and far between. Further growth is anticipated as existing U3As seek to develop 'daughter U3As'. There was discussion about different attitudes to growth within existing U3As with some keen on expansion fuelling setting up new U3As and others ticking over and living within 'comfort zones'.

It is clear that the movement is becoming more professional in its organisation and development. The Third Age Trust Development team is building a network of regional contacts to work with on development matters. The team is Mike, Zazia and Carole. Zazia has responsibility for most of Southern England.

Online Courses

This was a crowded seminar, indicating wide interest in the topic. There were 2 main areas of discussion; the U3A courses online the current and future position, and the collaboration with the Open University's Open Learn programme.

Our courses have been traditionally tutored courses aimed at members who are housebound and untutored courses aimed at U3A interest groups. Additionally there is agreed access for UK members to the more developed Australian UK system of Online Courses.

Price levels are thought to have held some people back from joining more than a single course. Now, for a single fee of £10 members can access ALL UK online courses for a 12 month period.

Enrol at <http://onlinecourse.u3a.org.uk/>

The same has been true of UK take up of the Australian courses. Now you can access all Australian untutored courses for a single fee of AUS\$25

Enrol at <http://www3.griffith.edu.au/03/u3a/>

More members willing to act as part of the tutoring teams are urgently needed, both to maintain the existing courses and to allow new ones to be offered.

Open Learn is an initiative of the Open University who had received funding to enable them to put learning units from many of their courses online free of charge. There are currently 5000 study hours in a vast range of units available. In discussion with the OU they have agreed U3As can access the material, can customise units to meet their particular need, can run the units for interest groups as well as individuals – all free.

If you use Open Learn you will be asked to register – in your 'interests' bit it would help if you mention you are a U3A member. In time a national grouping of U3A Open Learners can be formed online. Enrol at <http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/>

The AGM of the Third Age Trust

John and Jeff both attended the AGM. Apart from Minutes, Tellers appointed, Chair's report and approval of Annual Accounts the key questions were Elections of a new Chair, 2 Vice Chairs and Treasurer and debate and decision on the 2 motions submitted.

Elections

Chair

Ian Searle and **Alan Morris** stood for election. After a vote **Ian Searle** was elected

2 vice Chairs

Beth Butler and **Barbara Lewis** were returned unopposed

Treasurer

John Terry Hardie was returned unopposed

Motions

Regional Representation

The first motion moved by Crawley calling on the NEC to re-examine the balance of national representation from the regions with a view to increasing the representation from the larger regions. The NEC opposed this vigorously. As agreed by our Committee we supported it. In the event because of a large number of proxy votes the motion was carried by a large majority.

Future AGMs and Conferences

The second motion moved by the NEC called for the timing of the AGM, whether part of a wider conference or as a standalone meeting should be at the discretion of the NEC. This was carried by a large proxy vote majority.

Jean's farewell

In a farewell speech the retiring chair Jean Goodeve reiterated the achievement of a massive increase in membership and influence in government circles. She said how much she had enjoyed the responsibility. She also reported that Third Age Trust had been unable to find a suitable economic venue for the conference for next year and that this year's format would not take place. The implications for future years for the wider discussions and the AGM would be considered by the NEC.

Third Age staff were applauded for their work on organising this year's conference for the first time instead of contracting it out to SAGA. Much money had been saved and a good conference held.

Miscellaneous Issues

1 Survey of U3A Members

Sheila McGee had undertaken a survey of U3A Members. The objectives of the survey were:

1. Update basic knowledge of membership
2. How members view the services provided

3. What members would like the TAT to provide and what they would like to see provided in the future.

She undertook a comparison with membership in 2001 and in 2009.

I have a copy of the results and I list below one two results.

In 2001 74% female and 26% male and 71% female 29% male in 2009

In 2001 39% lived alone and 40% in 2009

In 2009 12% were members of more than one U3A

In 2009 67% felt that the U3A had improved their social life.

In 2009 73% live in a house with access to the Internet.

In 2009 66% of members can be contacted by e-mail.

- 1 161,000 copies of U3A News are printed at each run and advertising revenues are very good
- 2 A few quotes

'Positive Ageing ' is a good motto for us all

'Use it or lose it' is for the brain as well as the body.

'Older people like to be asked what we want by agencies rather than be told what we need.'

'Informal Adult Learning is what we do.'

- 1 Our friends from Wileys were there with a stall containing the new Older & Wiser books endorsed by TAT
- 2 We picked up some sample Job Descriptions from other U3As which will be available from the Archivist (Jeff)
- 3 Advance notice of the 2010 Photography Competition – theme is 'Coast'!
- 4 A Resource Centre list of all DVDs on a range of subjects available to borrow for Interest Groups etc.
- 5 Lists of previous conference motions agreed or rejected since 1984 (in the Archive)
- 6 Copy of the Annual Report and Accounts (in the Archive)
- 7 Copy of the major report 'Time to Learn (in the Archive)
- 8 Number of Photos taken at conference by John

Final Comments

It was very worthwhile attending the conference, mainly because of the large number of other U3A members we talked to. There were discussions over lunch coffee and tea breaks as well as in the bar. U3A members can certainly talk-including us!!

There are a variety of ways to organise local independent U3As and we all seemed to be pleased to share our sense of fun and commitment as well as a sharing of informal learning from each other. It was a privilege and a pleasure to attend on behalf of Chichester U3A.

John Fitzpatrick and Jeff Staniforth

September 2009