

## Opening Statement by the President, U3A Network Queensland to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland

At U3A - the University of the Third Age - we firmly believe we are making a significant difference in helping to alleviate isolation and loneliness affecting older people. This is especially so, within the 35 communities where we have a presence. The social connectivity U3As provide, in addition to the quality of our programs and the sense of purpose held by our members, all assist in mitigating social isolation and loneliness in these communities.

In the words of one U3A member, one of the strengths of U3A is that: "it provides an antidote to depression, isolation, boredom and loneliness."

In our view, while a number of organisations provide specific support for older Australians, U3As offer life-changing activities across a wide spectrum including informal education, wellness programs, social interaction and a wealth of enjoyable things to do with new and established U3A friends.

Internationally, the World Health Organisation Report on Social Isolation and Loneliness proposes that:

"High quality social connections are essential for our mental and physical health and our wellbeing – at all ages."

At U3A, we provide those social connections for those in the Third Age of their lives. These connections provide the cognitive stimulation, the physical activity opportunities, the peer group engagement and the the sense of purpose through volunteering - and they are collectively essential to ageing well physically and mentally.

Research lead by Dr Rosanne Freak-Poli into social isolation and loneliness in older people shows that: ....older people are faced with a number of adverse life events that can negatively impact social isolation and loneliness. Particularly widowhood is a huge adjustment. Retirement or redundancy; downsizing or moving house; the death of a partner, relative or close friend all can have a devastating emotional or financial consequence.

At U3A, we know from experience that serious illness affecting one's self, a partner or significant other, or the geographical separation from family, can be traumatic events in many lives, with potentially damaging emotional effects. U3A enables people to cope better in the company of others within the U3A community.

Members often say after getting through a traumatic experience in their lives: "U3A saved my life." This is heard many times, not just in Queensland but in U3As across Australia.

As mentioned in our submission, many members come to U3A, encouraged by family or friends who may know a member of a U3A or are members themselves. They understand the benefits U3A can offer, not only for the emotionally wounded, lonely or socially disengaged but also those who just want a more enjoyable and fulfilling time in the later years of their lives.

In terms of U3A helping further, if we were asked to contribute more broadly in mitigating isolation and loneliness in Queensland we could, with support, establish a U3A presence in a number of isolated locations that would benefit from access to U3A programs. An

objective within our Strategic Plan is to establish six new U3As during the currency of the Plan. We are already working on the establishment of two of the six in areas where no U3A exists at present, but where local government understands the benefits a U3A would bring to the local community.

Further evidence in the asset value of U3A is in Professor Helen Bartlett, Vice Chancellor and President of the University of the Sunshine Coast, and in the field of gerontology and a great supporter of U3A, who said:

“We need to showcase and recognise organisations such as U3A as a valuable asset in the ageing process. We know that learning helps older adults acquire psycho-social resources; it helps to build so many things related to self esteem, hope, communication, social integration and the like. These resources help us manage some of the less positive aspects of health decline associated with ageing.”

We also believe there is great potential for further research in this area and in areas such as the evaluation of U3A programs; new directions that could serve our communities better; mutual benefit of developing U3A programs to assist indigenous communities; and/or how we could best offer our volunteers training to attract and assist a wider range of the socially isolated and lonely within our communities.

It is also one of our strategic objectives to seek the assistance of those who can help us in that research. We would be delighted to receive guidance from the committee in how U3A could contribute further.

In conclusion, we consider that what we do at U3A is totally consistent with the WHO key policy priority to: ensure as far as possible that each individual maximises their capacity for healthy and active ageing in order to maintain functional capacity for as long as possible. We also consider that our objectives and programs are consistent with governmental objectives in the ageing demographic.

I hope it is clear through our submission and this statement, that U3A will continue to play a critical role in assisting those in their third age - and we remain ready to assist government in programs aimed at mitigating the adverse effects of isolation and loneliness in Queensland.