



## U3A NETWORK QUEENSLAND INC.

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### ***“Connecting Seniors to Lifelong Learning”***

#### ***Submission to Committee of Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland***

##### General Position

The position of U3A Network Queensland is that Universities of the Third Age (U3As) and their programs are excellent antidotes to loneliness and social isolation. U3As are community based, volunteer run associations that provide older retired and semi-retired persons with a new place to belong, new friendship groups and an opportunity to contribute or participate in an area where they feel valued. U3A offers age appropriate, intellectually stimulating programs; improvement and maintenance of physical skills; social activities and friendship.

It is recognised that social isolation and loneliness can be harmful to both the mental and physical health of individuals. While social isolation and/or loneliness can affect people at any age, at U3A we recognise that many of the factors, including cessation of employment, the trauma of serious illness, loss of a loved one or dislocation are particularly relevant to the older cohort of Queenslanders for whom U3A caters.

The majority of members come to U3A with the encouragement of family, friends and neighbours. This “word of mouth” form of advertising works well in terms of encouragement of those who might otherwise be reluctant to join. Those doing the encouraging are generally persons who know a member of a U3A or who are members themselves and who understand the benefits that U3A can offer the emotionally wounded, lonely or socially disengaged. Interestingly, those doing the encouraging may themselves live in another part of the country or the world.

The typical programs and the level of social engagement offered in a U3A offer the opportunity for all individuals to increase physical health and well-being and to become intellectually stimulated within a social setting.

In a paper titled *The Impact of Universities of the Third Age upon the Health and Welfare of their Membership*, a copy of which is attached to this submission, Dr Martin Bridgstock concluded that: *the activities promoted by Universities of the Third Age are strongly beneficial to the physical health and the cognitive health and wellbeing of their members.*

Dr Helen Bartlett, Vice Chancellor of the University of the Sunshine Coast and expert in the field of gerontology, made the following remarks when recently addressing the Annual General Meeting of the U3A Sunshine Coast:

*The research is still evolving but what we do know is that learning does help 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.*

And:

*We know from the research that formal higher education courses such as those at university aren't necessarily associated with wellbeing. Where the benefits have really been shown to be effective is with informal learning, such as people experience in U3A classes, learning activity that doesn't result in formal qualifications but appeals in increasing knowledge in an area of interest or helping to create hobbies, etc. These informal learning activities are definitely linked with improved social and psychological wellbeing.*

The position of U3A Network Queensland is further underscored by the belief that volunteering is another important factor in mitigating social isolation and loneliness. According to the Mayo Clinic Health System, volunteering has health benefits which include factors known to mitigate loneliness and social isolation:

- Decreased risk of depression
- Sense of purpose and new skills
- Staying physically and mentally active
- May reduce stress levels
- Helps in meeting others and developing new relationships.

U3A is a volunteer run organisation. Every aspect of the management and operation of a U3A association is carried out by volunteers.

An on-paper calculation in 2020 of the value of the volunteer effort in U3A associations in Queensland put the number of volunteers conservatively at 2 400 donating 300 000 hours per annum which when costed at \$25 per hour amounted to a volunteer contribution of \$7.5 m+ per annum.

## Background

U3A Network Queensland Inc. is the peak body for Universities of the Third Age (U3A) in Queensland. There are 34 U3As in Queensland (nearly 35, as a new association awaits notification of its incorporation) with around 23 000 members.

In Australia (as at November 2020) U3A associations numbered 240 with close to 105 000 members. There are U3As in all states and territories of Australia.

U3A is an international organisation. It was formed in France at the University of Toulouse in 1973 and spread to the United Kingdom where the model was modified and the Cambridge Model, which we follow in Australia, was devised.

The major changes to the original concept of U3A were that the organisation became community based as opposed to being tied to universities, volunteer run, and low fee paying and with programs devised by individual associations which utilised the knowledge and skills of association members.

U3A came to Australia in 1984 when COTA Victoria was instrumental in establishing associations in Melbourne. It spread to other states soon after and in Queensland the first U3As were established at the Sunshine Coast and in Brisbane. COTA Queensland was instrumental in the foundation of U3A in Queensland.

U3A Network Queensland has formed strategic partnerships with COTAQ, LGAQ and the Heart Foundation in an endeavour to promote the physical and mental health and well-being to older Queenslanders.

U3A Network Queensland is a member of the University of the Third Age Australian Alliance (U3AAA). At the most recent meeting of the U3AAA, alliance members were introduced to and received an address from Andrew Giles MP – Co-Chair of the *Parliamentary Friends for Ending Loneliness*. Following the briefing from Andrew Giles, each of the delegates provided him with an overview of the experience of their U3A Network and association members, with particular reference to the manner in which U3A offers its members programs that encourage ongoing physical and mental health, cognitive stimulation, and connectivity and social engagement.

U3AAA has lodged an application to be a member of the *Ending Loneliness Together Association*.

## General Response to The terms of Reference

Key findings of the State of the (Older) Nation (2021) included reports that *the vast majority of older Australians have had contact with someone they know in the last week, although half feel at least a bit lonely*. The finding goes on to say that the contact was most likely family (83%) friend (71%) or neighbour (48%). *Of concern is the 4% that have no contact with anyone in the past week. This was significantly higher among those aged under 65, lived in metropolitan areas or had a disability*.

Further: *within this study, more than half (53%) stated that they had not felt lonely in the past few weeks. However, 47% felt lonely at least some of the time. For 7% of the respondents they reported that they were lonely, most or all of the time*.

In addition: *More than one in two Australians aged 50+ are vulnerable. Analysis of the data was conducted by level of vulnerability using indicators such as: low personal annual income, living with disability, non-English speaking at home, recent bereavement, ATSI, domestic violence and homelessness*.

*The higher vulnerability group was more likely to be female, be aged 70 or over, live in Queensland and live outside capital cities. These results highlight a group of older, vulnerable people whose needs deserve particular attention, especially as the proportion of those with higher vulnerability has increased since the 2018 study.*

While the findings of the State of the (Older) Nation (2021) report referred to data pertinent to Australians across the nation, the findings are as relevant to Queenslanders as to those in other states. Of particular importance is the reference to higher level of vulnerability felt by older Queenslanders.

University of the Third Age (U3A) members in Queensland were subject to the state wide lockdown from March and even after the lockdown was eased they were (and in some respects still are) subject to restrictions impacting on their lives. The 34 U3A associations in Queensland reported a variety of mechanisms and practices which they implemented to ensure that their members felt connected and engaged throughout the lockdown. Members without access to technology were given special attention via phone trees, hard copy newsletters, puzzles, quizzes, jokes and other stimulatory material, sent via the post.

Presidents of the various Queensland U3A associations were able to communicate through an email network established for the purposes of information exchange about strategies to keep members feeling connected during the shutdown, management of risk for reopening and the development of COVID safe practices and plans.

Social isolation and loneliness are felt subjectively and seem to be exacerbated by issues such as severe trauma (loss of a significant other/chronic illness of self or partner/recent relocation, etc.); lack of available transport; decreased mobility; financial hardship; lack of English or English as a second language; cultural inhibitions, mental illness, etc.

In Queensland such feelings may also be augmented by physical isolation due to distance and the cost of travel to bridge the physical distance from loved ones, neighbours, shops and/or social facilities.

Lack of communication and connectivity are recognised problems in some areas of Queensland. Among the older generation, even where there are no connectivity problems, there may be limited knowledge and capacity to utilise communication devices.

Having a social network, a sense of belonging and feeling supported by one's peer group are highly protective factors in mitigating social isolation and loneliness.

At U3A in Queensland but also reported by other U3As across Australia, there is a common refrain: *U3A saved my life*. This phrase has been said many times by U3A members across the country and indeed across the world.

The comment is made usually after the member has suffered severe trauma such as the death or illness of a significant other; severe illness themselves; being forced to move house or locality, etc. Traumas of this nature can often

lead to people feeling very isolated and lonely, particularly after a period where friends and family have withdrawn their daily caregiving and/or support role.

Being able to keep in touch with family members and friends is also an important factor in mitigating social isolation and loneliness. U3As teach their members to get the best use from their media devices, how to engage in social media and be active with computers in the digital space.

This age of globalised employment can leave grandparents feeling very isolated from their children and grandchildren and being adept in the use of social media and interactive media platforms can reinforce relationships and allow shared experience.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, attention is drawn to the fact that since 1986 when U3A was first established in Queensland in two locations, the number of U3A associations has increased to 34 and overall membership has grown to as high as 24 000 state-wide. In addition, there are 3 locations in which the community is in the process of working towards the establishment of their own U3A.

Further, the U3A Network Strategic Plan has the objective of establishing six (6) new U3As within the scope of the Plan 2021 – 2025. All locations are outside the range of their nearest U3A.

Demographic data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) points to a steadily increasing growth of the 60+ population across Australia. Our concern is the proportion of the overall population that will be aged 60+ and the projections of the ABS are that by 2030, this demographic will form 20% of the population in Queensland. As the largest single provider of informal lifelong learning, health and well-being programs within Queensland, there is evidently a need for U3As to be established throughout the state.

Increasingly the role of local government has included the development of strategies to increase the health and well-being of the members of their communities. Many local governments already assist U3A associations within their boundaries to deliver their programs. The projected demographic trends are such that local and state governments would be well placed to consider partnerships with U3A Network Queensland to establish outlying associations in communities where currently there are none.

Of course, many clubs offer member benefits around social engagement and volunteering but few are devoted to the cognitive, physical and social health of the individual in the way that U3A is.

Submission by the U3A Queensland Network Management Committee