

UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

Thank you for inviting me to tell you about the University of the Third Age (or U3A for short) which started in 1972 as an offshoot of the University of Toulouse in France. U3A members there could sit in at university lectures but with the growth of U3A that is no longer feasible.

In 2000 U3A was introduced to South Africa by Sylvia Schrire who is still a very active committee member of Cape Town U3A, which was the first to be established. There are now 8 autonomous U3As in Greater Cape Town and another 18 throughout the rest of South Africa. World-wide there are U3As in more than 50 countries.

Why the name University of the Third Age? The First Age is formal education at school and university usually ending in one's teens or 20s. The Second Age is the education, knowledge and skills one acquires at work, in one's career, in one's social and family life - what one learns from all life's experiences. There is a strong element of compulsion in the formal education and training as one needs to learn and acquire skills necessary to earn a living, so inevitably there are aspects one finds tedious. But the University of the Third Age is post-retirement when one has the opportunity to learn, explore, brush up rusty skills (such as foreign languages), do research (and U3A Cape Town has a course **on Research for Fun**). You can choose to do what YOU want and what interests you without pressure of exams and the fear of failure.

The objective of U3A is to be a university in the original sense of the word - an egalitarian community of teachers and learners, sharing interests and enthusiasms. There is a real need for accessible and stimulating educational opportunities at a stage in retirement when people have more free time for self-development and social contact. It is a learning co-operative for senior citizens from all walks of life. No qualifications are required and none awarded.

Because each U3A is autonomous, they offer a different mix of courses depending on what members want and who has the skill, knowledge - and interest - to offer courses. Course leaders are unpaid though they are honoured and thanked at an annual course leaders' lunch. Some courses rely on a different speaker each month and as one of them remarked, U3A still follows the dop system by giving them a bottle of wine!

At Cape Town U3A we have about 70 courses offered from Monday to Saturday, either weekly, fortnightly or monthly, all held during the day as many older people don't like driving at night. Most courses are held in private homes, libraries or retirement villages. We have a number of more intellectual, knowledge-based courses such as **Natural Science, Environmental Affairs, History, English Literature, Current Affairs** and **foreign languages**. The arts are covered in courses on **Classical Music in depth, The Pleasures of Music, The Story of Art, photography, Opera and Ballet on DVDs**. We offer **Painting with Acrylics** and have a **Chamber Music Ensemble** which meets twice a month. Just like a traditional university we cater for other activities such as **Circle Dancing** and a variety of **hiking groups** for different levels of walkers. There is a tremendous demand for **Wine Appreciation Groups** - after all, we do live in the Cape, a leading wine-producing area. There is also a huge demand **for Bridge**. We also offer games like **Scrabble, Mahjong and Rummikub**

However, you are unlikely to find any U3A courses on cutting-edge technology or the latest abstruse scientific discovery! Most of us have computers and cell-phones but we rely on grandchildren for help, so we meekly accept comments such as 'Granny, I've shown you 6 times how to send an SMS'

As well as on-going courses, we have monthly general meetings and among our speakers, we have had such household names as **Patricia Glyn, Clem Sunter, Albie Sachs, Mark Solms**, a couple of distinguished Vice-Chancellors, **Jonathan Jansen and Max Price of UCT**. Among the very varied speakers have been **Pierre de Vos, Alex Borraine, George**

Ellis, winner of the Templeton Prize, **Iraj Abedian**, the economist, **Professor Solly Benatar**, **David Davidson** who once again won a gold medal for Kirstenbosch at the Chelsea Flower Show, the cartoonist, **Tony Grogan**, **Tim Noake**, **Alec Irwin**, the former Minister of Trade and Industry, the author **Sindiwe Magona**. Among the topics covered are various aspects of the **state of South Africa**, as well as some international problems such as **Who will be the next superpower**, **Xenophobia**, **the work of Doctors without Borders** for whom we had a collection and raised R20,000. We learnt about various aspects of science such as **fracking**, **the Quagga Project**, **a world without anti-biotics**, **The Square Kilometre Array (SKA) in Sutherland**, **climate change**, **Technology and Innovation**, **The Enigma Machine and other secret ciphers**, **Body language**, **The Dreaming Brain**, **Global Health**, **the pros and cons of nuclear energy in South Africa** and - very relevant to us - **the problems of aging!** We have also had talks on **the composer Verdi**, **how to listen to a symphony**, **as well as live opera**, **ballet**, **Spanish dancing and Dance for All**. At our last meeting in 2015 we had a young magician, who had written his last matric exam the day before - and he was excellent and told us the secret of how Aaron, the brother of Moses, was able to turn a rod into a snake.

We organise day outings to exhibitions and places of interest. There are also regular tours e.g. to Sutherland, Matjiesfontein and game parks. Last year we had a number of train tours in Namibia and there are plans to go to Victoria Falls and other places across our borders.

We take it in turns to host Forum Discussions where U3As within driving distance meet for a day to discuss problems, suggest solutions and generally get to know each other. A few years ago we held an Indaba in Cape Town when representatives from all U3As throughout the country met for a week's course of lectures and discussions.

We actively encourage membership across the whole spectrum, so annual subscriptions are minimal e.g. for Cape Town U3A it is R40 for those on e-mail and R70 for snail mail. Entry to most courses is R5 a head but obviously there are charges to cover the cost of materials e.g. **Painting with Acrylics**. Each U3A sets its own charges depending on expenses such as hiring venues for the monthly general meetings.

We are a non-racist, non-sexist organisation. Although we have a very popular **Interfaith** course dealing with aspects of a variety of religions and religious differences, we are strictly non-denominational, though we have heard very successful talks on **Religion and the practice of religion in the Age of Science**, given by **Professor Anwar Mall**, and **The human side of biblical heroes** given by **Dr Tzili Reisenberger**, a woman rabbi.

Despite our efforts and our welcome to everyone, U3A overall is still very largely white, middle class, English-speaking, so we are always pleased to see this stereotype breaking down e.g. **Paarl** is largely Afrikaans speaking, **Stilbaai** is bilingual, **Athlone** is a so-called Coloured suburb where it is very heartening to see how racially mixed the meetings are because U3A members can attend other U3As if the speaker or topic or course appeals.

But our big success is **Gugulethu** because no-one ever believed that a U3A could be established in a Black township - and it is only thanks to Sylvia Schrire's dedication, hard work and persistence that Gugulethu is now flourishing with a membership of 157, most of whom were domestic workers so the courses they want are mostly practical ones like baking and organising a food garden. It comes as a shock to the more privileged of us to realise that because of apartheid, shortage of money and lack of transport so many people living in a Black township which is part of Cape Town had never been to Cape Town and had never seen the sea. So thanks to the generosity of Golden Arrow buses, which has provided free transport, U3A has arranged trips to **the beach**, to **Kirstenbosch Gardens**, the **Aquarium**, **Iziko Museum** and the **Planetarium** - all with Xhosa-speaking guides. And what makes these trips so worthwhile is the number of questions that are asked afterwards. These are real learning experiences - a perfect example of cognitive education. Now Gugulethu members have been up **Table Mountain** with plans to visit **Parliament**, **the Red Cross**

Children's Hospital. They also want to visit a hotel, so it is planned to kill 2 birds with one stone by going to the **Verde Hotel** which is an environmentally-friendly building.

One of the sub-themes you identified for this Conference is '**Thinking critically about formal and non-formal learning opportunities to advance cognitive education**' and there cannot be a better example than Gugulethu U3A. And Sylvia Schrire who works closely with Gugulethu reports that as the members' horizons widen and they are encouraged to voice their views and think for themselves, they are growing in confidence and competence in running their own organisation.

It was also suggested that telling you about our organisation is appropriate to another sub-theme '**Thinking critically about lifelong optimal health and well-being (physical, cognitive, social, emotional health)**.' In the past, retirement was regarded as a time of boredom without purpose, a loss of status, while waiting for the Grim Reaper. But now we are living longer so retirement can last 20 – 30 years or longer. With better medical care, we no longer feel that we are old at 50 or 60. We can enjoy life (provided we are reasonably healthy and have enough money to live comfortably) and stay active for much longer than used to be the norm in the past. For example, our U3A committee has a number of 80-year-olds with heavy portfolios which they handle most competently. Among our course leaders and speakers we have 90-year-olds who are doing a very good job. We don't have any statistics to prove that U3A members live longer and happier lives, but there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to confirm it.

In U3A there is little of the back-biting and competitive rivalry often found at work where people trying to climb the corporate ladder will also try to eliminate rivals. And I've noticed many of my younger acquaintances can't wait to retire so they can join U3A. On a personal note, I enjoyed my time as a High School English and History teacher, but I can honestly say that in many respects, retirement has been the happiest time of my life - largely thanks to U3A. In the words of the song, '**Grow old along with me - the best is yet to be.**'