WHAT IS THE “ *UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE [ U3A] “?*

A popular search engine describes U3A as:

“… a network of learning groups aimed at encouraging older people to share their knowledge, skills and interests in a friendly environment…”

For retirees, a Third  Age of living can be enlivened and enriched through learning from each other in a sociable, relaxed atmosphere.  There are no exams, no academic stress, but there is positive and lasting benefit to the physical and mental health of all involved and, because of the emphasis on social well-being, there are fine friendships to be made on the journey.

From its origins in France in the 1970s, The University of the Third Age has spread rapidly across the world:  7 million Chinese citizens are in U3A groups.  Australians enjoy a popular, well-organised nationwide spread of branches.   In the UK  there are 1,035 branches, while  in Ireland there are  30  to date and they are affiliated to  AIUTA  -  l’Association Internationale des Universités du Troisième Âge - a confederation of over fifty countries supporting U3A.

In Ireland and in the UK , the Self  Help Learning  model of U3A practice is the major factor which distinguishes U3A from other retirement agencies because U3A members are also, by and large, the teachers.  Groups in Ireland must register their  initial start-up intentions with Age Action, but each is autonomous and administered by volunteers within its own branch.   Groups operate under the principles and practice of U3A worldwide.  These principles protect the integrity of the system and are set out below:

**“ The  Principles  of  the  U3A  Movement**

The U3A movement is non-religious, non-political and has three main principles:

**The Third Age  Principle**

Membership of a U3A is open to all in their third age, which is defined not by a particular age but by a period in life in which full time employment has ceased.

Members promote the values of lifelong learning and the positive attributes of belonging to a U3A.

Members should do all they can to ensure that people wanting to join a U3A can do so.

**The Self Help Learning  Principle**

Members form interest groups covering as wide a range of topics and activities as they desire.- by the members, for the members.

No qualifications are sought or offered. Learning is for its own sake, with enjoyment being the prime motive, not qualifications or awards.

There is no  distinction between the learners and the teachers, they are all members of U3A.

**The Mutual Aid Principle.**

Each U3A is a mutual aid organisation with adherence to the guiding principles of the U3A movement.

No payment is made  to members for services rendered to any U3A.

Each U3A is self-funded with membership subscriptions and costs  kept as low as possible. **“**

 (The Third Age Trust)

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U3A branches hold  a monthly or fortnightly meeting with a guest speaker, followed by a social period for coffee and conversation .  These often serve as a first Introduction to new members.  However, the Self Help Learning Principle outlined above is at the heart of the Movement , so that interest groups may be formed by  say, 5 to 20   members, meeting at a frequency they decide.

Knowledge is shared in an atmosphere of friendly encouragement and experience shows that confidence grows rapidly as people relax into new friendships and minds are opened up to new interests and skills.

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