

Chapter 5

The University of the Third Age in Italy: A Dynamic, Flexible, and Accessible Learning Model



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Introduction

According to the European Commission's Lisbon Strategy—issued in 2000, reiterated in Barcelona in 2002, and constantly reaffirmed thereafter in key policy documents—Italy and all the other European Union member states are committed to identify coherent strategies and practical measures to foster 'lifelong learning for all' (European Council, 2000). Nevertheless, regardless of the fact that the number of older adults in Italy, who are looking to acquire new knowledge and skills is growing at an unprecedented rate, the Italian government has been reluctant to recognise the need to provide educational opportunities for seniors. Indeed, it was only in the last few years that Italy formally recognised the benefits of education and learning programmes for adults. In this respect, different proposals have been made at national level: community education, adult education, and finally lifelong learning. Although proposals made so far have been conceived with specific objectives in mind, age-relevant educational targets still need to be established to-date. The concept of 'learning' itself has over time come to bear double meaning. On the one hand, it means learning at any age (*lifelong learning*) by extending to *lifewide learning* (where learning occurs in formal structures as well as through other experiences). On the other hand, it means *learning for all*—that is, trying to meet everyone's needs. As a result, it should not come as a surprise that attracting older adults back to education, requires policy makers to consider that lifelong learning is not made up exclusively of formal education circuits, but also includes opportunities from non-formal education (Istituto per lo Sviluppo della Formazione Professionale dei Lavoratori, 2003).

In Italy, the majority of non-formal learning activities for older adults are offered by the Universities of the Third Age (U3As) and, to a lesser extent, by volun-

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tary organisations. The term ‘university’ is used in the medieval sense, denoting member students engaged in the selfless pursuit of knowledge and truth as an end-in-itself. U3As constitute settings where older persons participate in cultural projects that augment both self-awareness and social responsibility. In Italy, there are five organisations which run recognised U3As: Unitre (250 branches) (<http://www.unitre.net>), FederUni (250 branches) (<http://www.federuni.it>), Uniauser (120 branches), Cnupi (40 branches) (<http://www.cnupi.it>), and Unieda (34 branches) (<http://www.unieda.it>) (Luppi, 2016; Principi & Lamura, 2004). Although all U3As share common objectives such as a lifelong learning ethos that considers some form of gerotranscendence as essential, there are also significant differences in structure and organisation between them; these vary according to the particular features of each U3A and the ways in which they are accessible at local level. This chapter charts the founding and development of U3As in Italy, focusing on theoretical learning perspectives, and members’ profiles and motivation to enrol. It also addresses the preferred and most common curricula, and preferred teaching strategies. The chapter concludes by noting the contributions of U3As in Italy towards active and successful ageing, and the movement’s most pressing challenges in the foreseeable future.

Origins and Development

U3As in Italy have developed differently from those in other European countries, where they have been promoted by regular universities (Principi & Lamuria, 2009). Such peculiar development, on the one hand, has facilitated local connection and focus on the users, whilst on the other hand has caused the development of precarious, transient, and different U3A models. In Italy, the term ‘University of the Third Age’ is actually an extensive term that describes different networks of educational providers, and a wide range of learning programmes and participants. The International Association of Universities of the Third Age (AIUTA) was founded in 1975 to connect the growing U3A movement (Formosa, 2014). Nevertheless, despite its international title it is only recently that AIUTA has recognised the validity of U3As which are not linked to traditional universities. The presence of AIUTA at international committees is a positive and strong strategy to put the issues of older adult learning on the political agenda by exerting pressure for more opportunities for older adult learning this also improving the well-being of older persons in general.

The first U3A in Italy was founded in Turin in 1975, followed by many others in the late 1970s and 1980s. During the latter period, U3A coordinators in Italy were aware that most U3As oscillated between two key models—namely, the francophone and anglophone models—and reacted by opting for a more culturally hybrid U3A model for the Italian context; this is one that links and combines an ethos for learning with sociocultural objectives, whilst embracing the principles of self-help and self-determination. Indeed, Italian U3As are not affiliated with, or administered by, regular or adjunct university faculties, nor are they established and funded by local government. Maintaining high standards is not the primary objective of U3As in

Italy, as curricula are not drawn up by university committees, and teaching is not facilitated by academics. Similar to the anglophone U3A model, Italian U3As include no ‘top-down’ administrative arrangement, but opt for a ‘bottom-up’ approach that exemplifies a culture of mutual aid and voluntarism. Following one of the Laslett’s (1989) key principles, most of the activities at Italian U3As are run by volunteers and made freely available to all members. All U3As in Italy are independent, self-governing, and democratically run organisations and open to all without academic admission requirements or examinations. As recently stated by Luppi,

Third age universities set out to promote the dissemination of culture, foster the inclusion of older persons in the social and cultural life of their local communities and provide appropriate responses to the educational and learning needs of citizens. The cultural activities and courses provided by third age universities generally cover a wide range of theoretical subjects and some practical activities (ranging from literature, theatre, visual arts, history, philosophy, psychology, religion, politics, economics, science, computing, foreign languages, music, choir, dance, expressive workshops including painting, embroidery, to restoration). The course catalogues are based on a careful analysis of the characteristics, needs and interests of the local community and the members of each university association.

Luppi, 2016: 204

The most recent data on Italian U3As claimed that as much as ‘96.5% have external teachers, the majority of them (57.3%) being volunteers, although some are also hired as occasional consultants (31.3%, especially school teachers), and hardly ever as permanent staff’ (Principi & Lamura, 2009: 252). The administration of U3As in Italy is generally based on volunteers who take on both management and teaching roles, whilst offices are run on minimal operational costs. The range of courses is extensive, and classes are conducted throughout the year. Only a few of them receive any assistance or financial support from local government, with U3A members paying between a 100 and 200 € per semester (12–14 weeks). This amount allows them to have access to the biweekly 2–3 h lectures and distinctive monthly seminars. Hence, the cost of lifelong learning for older Italian citizens is relatively affordable and allows for a significant range of participation. The U3A model fosters a system where learners also take on the role of teachers and each U3A member represents their own skills, expertise, and life experiences to others. Indeed, learning programmes tend to include intellectually, physically, and socially stimulating topics which are planned and coordinated by retired people who are knowledgeable in their subject areas.

Theoretical Learning Perspectives

In the light of the determination of older adults to participate in learning opportunities, it is crucial to find out which educational models best meet their interests and goals (Dal Ferro, 2009). Polverini and Lamura (2003) stated that geragogical learning models are still missing in Italy, making it difficult to effectively meet the diversity of needs expressed by senior citizens. However, since the early 2000s many

theoretical perspectives have guided the implementation of learning programmes at U3As (Findsen & Formosa, 2011; Formosa, 2010a, 2016a). Whilst it is true that some facilitators still adopt a traditional (pedagogical) approach, which is based on an overly disciplined transmission of knowledge, an increasing number of facilitators are utilising a more participative approach. As Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) highlighted with respect to adult learners, older adult learners are also highly independent in their learning approach and prefer to take an active role in the class without following any rigid teaching schedule. Older learners value a tutor who is interested in their opinions, who treats them as peers and gives them opportunities to express their opinions. As a result, many facilitators follow a liberal learning paradigm to consult older adults on matters related to the curricula, teaching pattern, materials for learning, and seating style. Older learners like to set their own goals, and these might differ even in the same class. Many tutors at Italian U3As disclose to learners their aim and objectives early on in the training programmes, whilst also encouraging and assisting learners in setting personal goals by establishing personal targets at the very first session.

Since learners are generally weighing reasons to enrol in a specific learning programme and exploring and evaluating specific programmes for their relevance to their interests and plans, many tutors address these matters at the beginning of sessions, especially when new topics are introduced, and they also ensure that concepts are presented in contextual settings that are familiar to older persons. Another approach that has guided the implementation of learning strategies at U3As is founded on the belief that the learners' lifelong and lifewide experience should have a central role in the learning process. As Knowles et al.'s (1998) work emphasised, mature learners bring rich life experience to the class, an experience that emanates from their occupation careers or even from family experiences or life transitions. U3A tutors are generally ready to recognise when learners are drawing on their life experience, and quickly act to connect the ongoing learning process and outcomes derived from it. When this occurs, the role of older learners at U3As is not to sit perfectly still, listening passively, but actually to have an active role in the learning experience. In order to stimulate such an 'active' form of participation, facilitators tend to utilise role-playing or discussion techniques which encourage learners to forward their views on the subject. When older adult learners can connect new learning to their own experience through a meta-cognitive process, the taught material is more likely to be understood and remembered. By reflecting on the ongoing learning process in terms of their own experience, older adults are able to transform their earlier experience into a deeper understanding of both the surrounding natural and social environment (Kolb, 1984).

Members Profile, Motivation, and Curricula

Although U3As in Italy are open to people of all ages, the average age of members is between 65 and 75, the majority of whom are female (the ratio is about 2 females

to 1 male). This may be due to different reasons such as the gender differences in life expectancy in Italy, and the social and informal character of the U3A learning experience which tends to be more attractive to older women compared to their male counterparts. As Williamson (2000) noticed, older men and women approach learning in later life in different ways: men in U3As prefer to 'sit and think', whilst women like being more active and 'free' to do things that they were unable to perform previously. Moreover, the 'open door' policy means that U3As attract participants from various socio-economic backgrounds, attracting retirees with higher-than-average educational qualifications who held leadership positions in their former occupation roles, but also peers with no or basic schooling experience who wish to update their knowledge and skills in a variety of subjects. The search for new opportunities to socialise the desire to develop one's own psychophysical independence and the ambition to achieve a higher cultural and scientific knowledge is amongst the main motivations for older adults in Italy to enrol in U3As. In other words, the social aspect of learning seems to be the key reason for participating in learning avenues, spurred by emergent social bonds from meeting same-aged peers, escaping daily routine, making new friends, and joining a community of learners. Older learners' interests vary greatly regarding contents and subject areas. Programmes reflect the needs and interests of older learners through age-relevant curricula. Courses vary widely in contents and formats: study or discussion groups, workshops, excursions, seminars on topics such as physical exercise, health and self-care, human relations, social conflict, creative and biography writing, courses about the computer and the Internet, social sciences, women's issues, and local and general history. Art is often taught through artistic experiences such as drawing, painting, theatre, and music. Principi and Lamura's study found that in Italian U3As the

...prevocational courses are, in general, not as popular, the most attended ones in this category being those on ceramics, restoration, painting, sculpture, mosaics, glass work, and arts in general. The highest percentage of participants is in...general culture, sport activities, expressive education (graphics, plastics, literature), cinema language, photography, and music are the most popular. As far as the percentage of over 65 participants at the various courses is concerned, the courses with a high percentage of senior citizens are those on gardening (50%), voluntary work education (48.5%), computer science and Web design (47.4%), education on the rights of the citizen (43.2%), musical education (42.7%), general culture (41.2%), and environmental education (41%).

Principi & Lamura, 2009: 250-1

As expected, classes are heterogeneous in terms of participants, but facilitators attempt to provide U3A members with the best possible learning experience, whether it involves learning new skills, a social or cultural experience, or simply as a source of inspiration and enjoyment.

Learning and Teaching Strategies

One key challenge for U3As involves the setting of learning and teaching strategies that are attuned to all members irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds and lifetime experience (Formosa, 2012). Moreover, older adult learners expect facilitators to treat them as peers, to allow them an exchange of opinions, and not to digress from the established learning outcomes. Jarvis (2001) observed that new approaches, as opposed to traditional education models, were required for late-life learning to be a success. In Italy, the learning programmes, formal lectures, discussion groups, or seminars organised by U3As are attended by a number of participants varying from groups of around 15 people to ones of around 100, depending on the subject and the geographical setting. The teaching and learning strategies at U3As are aimed at creating a welcoming approach and a positive atmosphere so that all learners feel comfortable and socially included. Facilitators coordinate training programmes in a way that learners are challenged but not to the extent that they feel discouraged, stressed, or bored. They encourage learners to ask questions, ask for clarifications, and to regard challenges as positive experiences. This hermeneutical approach, which aims to understand rather than illustrate, helps to contextualise learning and applies it to real life. Other facilitators who may opt for a more experience-based learning approach include structured activities such as simulations, games, role plays, group discussions, and/or acting. In such circumstances, facilitators coordinate case studies, role plays, video-based activities, group discussions, autobiographical writing, problem-based learning, group work, and self-directed projects. Briefly, experience-based learning draws on the learners' life experience, as it engages the whole person, stimulates reflection on experience, and encourages openness towards new experiences and, overall, encourages lifelong learning. As expected, peer learning is popular amongst facilitators and members alike, as in Findsen and Formosa's words

...older persons find peer teaching as a way to meet their need to feel needed. Peer teaching is a learner-centred activity because members of educational communities plan and facilitate learning opportunities for one other. Peers will plan and facilitate courses of study and be able to learn from the planning and facilitation of other members of the community: "peer teaching is a rare and provocative model of education in which, in the morning, a person may teach a class for her peers, and that same afternoon have one of her 'students' become her teacher"...

Findsen & Formosa, 2011: 104–5

Facilitators also tend to go beyond descriptive explanations, and instead, prefer shared research, analyses, and interpretation of cultural facts where learners are given the role of active participants. Assessment is excluded in U3A classes because of the 'voluntary learning' principle, and the fact that people attend training programmes for the sake of learning as an end-in-itself. Instead of promoting learning in isolation, the U3A model encourages participants to share their knowledge collectively, integrating everybody's ideas and talents into a democratic learning design. Therefore, the co-construction of learning experiences through dialogue, research, and practice benefits from its strong grounding in autonomous and democratic learning

(Findsen, 2006). Facilitating sharing at U3As aims to develop confidence, as older adults appreciate the value of the knowledge they share with others. The facilitation process also supports the attitudes, previous learning and world views that learners bring to the class, acknowledging and giving value to every member's experience and contribution. Facilitators thus embody an ethical stance that accords respect to the learners, values each individual, and recognises their need for self-direction. Follow-up activities, self- and peer-assessments are carried out to provide regular critical feedback. As facilitators are provided with freedom in the way they coordinate their training programmes, it results that the latter may differ from a very structured setting to a very informal scenario where facilitators actually consider themselves as other members of the class. However, they remain at all times responsible for the direction of the class:

Educators therefore hold a position of authority deriving from his/her competence which, in turn, commands, respect. Authority must, however, never degenerate to a form of authoritarianism since 'the educator's task is to encourage human agency, not moulded in the manner of Pygmalion'...

Formosa, 2011: 327

In brief, older adult learning is very different from learning at universities and other tertiary institutions. The facilitators' approach is generally holistic, implying that they must recognise and cater for the human needs of learners, which can include educational, cultural, and social elements.

Implications for Active Ageing, Quality of Life, and Well-Being

U3As in Italy are playing an important, albeit largely unrecognised role in the country's active ageing process, as they are addressing a specific audience of adults who are motivated to improve their quality of life and well-being. The emergent experiences provide Italian older persons with an opportunity to engage in social participation, cultural promotion, and active citizenship, in the face of widespread ageism and age discrimination. In this way, U3As allow older adults to fulfil their potential—mostly as the result of statutory mandatory retirement—and provide them with the opportunity to stay physically, socially, and mentally active, as well as strengthen national levels of collective memory and intergenerational solidarity (McQueen, Hallam, Creech, & Varvarigou, 2013). U3As allow older adults to experience the joy of acquiring and formulating new knowledge, having a positive effect on older persons' lives. One key impact is that people who were previously not able to engage in formal educational programmes because of either work or family commitments now have easy access to cultural learning initiatives. Moreover, U3As can facilitate communication skills and critical thinking amongst older persons, which in turn fosters levels of social inclusion in later life, as well as stimulating creativity and new ways of expression. Many studies have, in fact, shown the various benefits of adult learning

programmes that include opportunities for physical and cognitive energy, recreation and social interaction for the overall health of the elderly, bringing advantages such as increased intellectual development, life satisfaction, personal fulfilment, creative expression, and social networking building (Bunyan & Jordan, 2005; Escobar Chua et al., 2014; Formosa, 2013; Hafford-Letchfield, & Formosa, 2015; Hebestreit, 2008; Siedle, 2011). Indeed, Formosa's perceived benefits of U3As for members resonate extremely well with the Italian context:

[U3As] fulfil various positive social and individual functions such as aiding lonely older persons to re-socialize themselves by enabling them to form new groups and increase their interests. They also provide opportunities, stimulation, patterns, and content for the use and structure of the older persons' free time which would otherwise be characterised by inactivity. U3As also develop in members a lofty and progressive delight of life, increase the social integration and harmony of older persons in society, inject a sense of creativity in older persons, and make older persons more visible in society...U3As also address various intellectual, emotional, physical, leisure, and spiritual needs of older persons, as well as provide older persons with the opportunity to organise and coordinate social/cultural activities and thus make their lives more fruitful and energetic.

Formosa, 2010b: 5

Indeed, successful participation in educational and learning programs has the potential to support a feeling of self-efficacy, especially since being part of a U3A group may improve members' levels of self-confidence. Thanks to the development of the ability to access information, U3As can assist older people to become more aware of their human and legal rights and thus mitigate against elder abuse and foster active citizenship in both public and political spheres. As governments everywhere are looking for inexpensive solutions to challenges associated with population ageing, investing in U3As is surely a relatively efficient and uncomplicated way to augment the levels of active, healthy, and positive ageing.

Conclusion: Looking Towards the Future

The continuous ageing of Italian society throughout the current century (Italy is the second oldest country in the world) suggests that more older adults will join U3As in the near future and thus will require more varied continuing educational programmes, putting on more logistic and financial pressure on the U3As. Italian administrators are already reporting difficulties in recruiting course directors and facilitators/tutors. Should the number and type of lectures be required to increase, funding may become even more of a challenge. There is a vast difference between informal and formal provision in terms of accessible state funds which are, truth be told, non-existent for U3As. Unfortunately, even European Union funds that are allocated to lifelong learning projects are used to redevelop workforce, productivity, and the economy rather than to enhance learning for ageing and retired adults (Borg & Formosa, 2016; Formosa, 2016b). The fact that U3As rely on their members' voluntary work may actually be turning against the interests of this movement, as governments tend to take

this global and national initiative for granted. Another pressing challenge is that not all volunteering facilitators have the required geragogical skills to coordinate learning programmes for older adults. Since the teaching and learning of older adults requires a specific *raison d'être*, facilitators need not only to be prepared academically, but also to be trained socially and culturally about a number of issues concerning older learners, to be able to creatively modify the conventional provision of education and to offer them those opportunities that cater to their physical, psychological and social needs. Perhaps quality, reliability, and consistency of the learning provision for older adults might be best established through professional training courses. The relative absence of men amongst the U3As' members remains a challenge as fewer men are attracted to seek membership (Formosa, Chetcuti Galea, & Farrugia Bonello, 2014; Formosa, Fragoso, Jelenc Krašovec, & Tambaum, 2014; Formosa, Fragoso, & Jelenc Krašovec, 2014). To this effect, it would be best if U3As take a leaf out of the Men's Sheds' movement and realise that

...the most effective learning from men in community settings occurs where learning intentions are not formalized or brought to the fore, where the pedagogies build on what men know, and where social relationships rather than courses or enrolments are emphasized. For men with the most negative attitudes towards learning, pedagogies based on communities of men's informal practice have been found to be effective.

Golding, 2012: 144

Moreover, if the U3A wants to become a more inclusive learning model it needs to attract other disadvantaged population groups—such as older persons with disability, ethnic minorities, and residents in long-term care facilities—whilst also revising the concept of learning as a formal classroom-based activity in favour of other alternative styles and settings. It is also augured that in the near future Italian U3As will implement online learning procedures, creating online platforms for older people to share their life experience, skills, and talents:

U3As must not assume that older learners continue living in some by-gone world. Rather, e-learning has become increasing popular in later life as it offers the opportunity for older learners to access information and communicate with others when and if they want to. For U3As to continue being relevant to contemporary elders, centres must make more effort to embed their learning strategies in the web 2.0 revolution that now provides extremely user-friendly applications...[E-learning] offer[s] limitless possibilities for an interactive, empowering, and participatory form of older adult learning.

Formosa, 2014: 48

E-learning represents an accessible, comfortable, safe environment to encourage learning at an appropriate pace, suitable to the needs of the participants involved. It enables older learners to be in charge of their own learning experience, deciding what to learn, how to learn, with whom to learn, what goals to achieve, and what value they get from learning (Talmage, Lacher, Pstross, Knopf, Burkhart, 2015). Nevertheless, despite the challenges that U3As in Italy are currently facing—and will be facing more starkly in the foreseeable future—the movement remains a dynamic, flexible, and accessible learning model for older Italian adults. The movement changes contours whilst remaining within the spirit of the original principles, and this is testament

to its dynamicity; its chameleon approach to teaching, learning and curricular models is witness to its flexibility in the provision of subject modules; whilst the fact that its premises are located within various structures in both rural and urban locations is proof of its accessibility to as wide a range of older adults as possible.

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