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ABN: 35 234 986 878  
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**U3A-ACT INCORPORATED  
TUESDAY 19 NOVEMBER 2024  
Hughes Community Centre, Hughes  
PRESIDENT'S REPORT**

**Summary**

The past year has seen further evidence of growth and recovery in U3A Canberra. Membership has grown, very slightly, for the first time since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the overall number of courses has increased. There has been an encouraging number of new volunteers coming forward across several of our volunteer teams. We have initiated some potentially productive new partnerships. We have invested in equipment and improvements to facilities. Our financial position remains extremely strong. Nonetheless, U3A does face some challenges, particularly around expanding our membership to reach more older Canberrans and ensuring that members have access to a wide range of engaging courses and activities.

**Membership**

Our total membership grew from 4234 in September 2023 to 4276 in September 2024, a modest increase of around 1%. While only a small increase, this compares to declining membership every year since the beginning of the COVID pandemic. There are several reasons why membership did not recover immediately once the peak of the pandemic had passed. First, a number of long-running U3A groups ceased operating in 2020 and have not returned – some members joined U3A specifically for these activities, so have not maintained their membership. Second, a surprising consequence of COVID was widespread workforce shortages, and quite a number of our semi-retired members found themselves undertaking more paid employment. Most importantly, however, quite a lot of older people changed their routines during the pandemic and have generally reduced their level of participation in public and social activities. This has affected not just U3A but many other organisations that cater primarily to older people. Many Australian U3As have since started to experience growth, but most report that this is not due to former members returning, but more to new members joining U3A for the first time. U3A Canberra appears to also be following this pattern.

## **Courses and activities**

The number of courses offered grew to 257 as of early October, the highest number since our pre-COVID peak in 2019. From attendance records and room rent income it is clear that actual participation has continued to grow. Likewise, the Walks and Tours program, while not recovering to the pre-COVID scale, has continued to expand, and many members have taken advantage of some excellent offerings. Members have also enjoyed activities organised in partnership with other organisations such as the ANU School of Music and the National Film and Sound Archive. The Tuesday Forum series has seen record attendances, stimulated by an outstanding program of speakers. Importantly, the forums have been made available to other Australian U3As, and this has proven a popular offering. Over 600 U3A Canberra members have joined the forums this year, as well as members from 27 regional U3As.

## **Volunteers**

U3A Canberra is one of the largest U3As in Australia, and our size and complexity make us particularly dependent on the commitment of our dedicated volunteers. Some volunteer roles remain largely unseen by members, but without it U3A would not function as it does. All members should be appreciative of the time and effort that our volunteers put in. While there are always areas of U3A that need more volunteer assistance, it is pleasing to see that there has been a noticeable improvement this year in members responding to calls for volunteers, and we have been able to fill a number of volunteer roles, including key positions where long-serving volunteers were ready to pass the role on to another volunteer. In this regard I would especially like to recognise the contributions of Anne Franklin, David Wilson and Dorothy Zenz.

## **Finance**

As the financial papers and the report from the Treasurer indicate, U3A Canberra continues to enjoy a very strong financial position. Our reserves are in fact considerably higher than what is required to meet our very conservative objectives, i.e. sufficient reserves to fund a full fit-out of new premises should it be required, and to withstand an enforced period of non-operation, such as an event of similar impact to the COVID pandemic.

Several factors have led to the increased accumulated surplus, including: much greater rent relief from the ACT Government during the pandemic period than was anticipated; a number of capital expenditure items which were anticipated but ultimately not required; and the rise in interest rates, which has meant we have received significant investment income, which was previously negligible. Our underlying objectives are to ensure U3A's financial sustainability, while being well placed to invest in facilities and services, and also keeping U3A affordable and accessible to members. As our costs rise each year, it is to be anticipated that surpluses will decline in coming years. It is worth noting that the surplus for this year is almost the same as the interest earned from our term deposits. As interest rates are likely to fall, this will likely reduce our surplus. Decisions about future levels of membership fees or other charges will need to be made year by year, but our current strong position means it is likely there will be no need for any increase in fees for the foreseeable future.

## **Facilities**

During the past year U3A extended its usage agreement on the Hughes premises, and undertook improvements at all of our premises, in cooperation with COTA and the ACT property group. This includes new classroom furniture at Cook and Hughes, a new office setup at Hughes, and improvements to IT/AV equipment at Hughes and Flynn. In addition, the long-running issue with heating at Hughes was resolved at the end of last year.

## **Policy reviews**

This year the committee has undertaken the three-yearly review of U3A policies and procedures and made a number of small but useful changes. The Code of Conduct has also been revised, and an information campaign to update members on this will be undertaken at the start of 2025.

## **Member survey**

In early 2024 we undertook an extensive member survey, which attracted a very strong response. Members generally expressed a high level of satisfaction with U3A and made numerous suggestions which have been taken up, particularly by the two committee working groups on membership and program development.

## **The wider U3A movement**

U3A Canberra has taken an active and constructive role in helping to build a strong and collaborative U3A movement, especially through the U3A Network NSW and the national collaborative body, U3A Australia. Although collaboration is sometimes difficult and time-consuming, these bodies have great potential for developing new programs and resources, and creating partnerships with state and national organisations. Thanks are especially due to Alex Gosman and Bob Nield for their work with these bodies.

## **Future challenges**

While U3A Canberra is very strong, there remain a number of challenges which will be with us for several years ahead. The committee has this year been focussed on two particular areas: membership growth, and program development. A growing membership makes for a healthier organisation, with more courses and activities, more new ideas, and a larger pool of volunteers. This goes hand in hand with a more extensive program of courses and activities that reflects members' needs and interests. In both cases, working groups have developed plans for new initiatives that are not 'quick fixes', or 're-inventing the wheel', but rather approaches that will re-focus U3A on reaching our widest possible target audience, ensuring that members have access to a wide variety of engaging courses and activities well into the future.

Lindsay Rae

President