



U3A ACT INC

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Dr Sandra Lilburn,
Committee Secretary,
Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs,
Legislative Assembly of the A.C.T.

Dear Dr Lilburn,

Inquiry into School Closures and Reform of the ACT Education System Submission by U3A ACT Inc

1.00 Background Information on U3A:

1.01 U3A ACT Inc was established in 1986, following establishment of the first U3A (University of the Third Age) in Victoria in 1984.

1.02 The initial concept originated in Toulouse, France, in 1972, where universities began to provide educational opportunities for older adults. The idea rapidly spread to the UK but, given that UK and Australian universities were not then particularly committed to the idea of community education, the Australian model, which is sometime referred to as the Cambridge model, has developed along the lines of self-managed community organisations, substantially independent of established universities.

1.03 There are now several hundred U3As in Australia – each essentially independent, although increasingly cooperating with one another and sharing ideas, public liability insurance cover, copyright license agreements, etc.

1.04 U3A ACT is one of the largest, with nearly 3750 members. It offers well over 200 low-cost courses per year, covering the broad topics of Arts and Film, Computer Studies, Current Affairs, English Language and Literature, History, Languages, Music, Philosophy and Religion, Recreation, Science Health and the Environment, and Social and Behavioural Sciences. These courses generally occupy two hours per week and extend from just a few sessions to anything up to 40 weeks duration. There are no exams. In addition U3A ACT offers an extensive program of lunchtime forums with guest speakers. It also offers a range of walks and tours, there are screenings of early films and it supports no less than 9 instrumental groups and choirs. Membership is open to anyone who is not working full time and is aged 50 or over – the ‘third age’ or ‘the age of active retirement’.

1.05 More remarkably, the human resources required to manage U3A ACT and to deliver its courses have been provided entirely by volunteers. There is currently no

paid staff, nor, until later this year, will U3A ACT have been the recipient of any government subsidies.

2.00 U3A's Interest in this Inquiry:

2.01 The principal reason for this submission is that the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry contain three topics of vital interest to U3A ACT:

2. The impact of school closures, with a focus on community experiences and attitudes;
3. Community responses (in respect of the) interest expressed by school communities to re-open schools listed for closure;
3. Community responses (in respect of) new uses for school facilities.

2.02 This interest stems from the fact that U3A ACT was informed, around September 2008, that it had been successful in its bid to lease space in the intended Cook Regional Community Centre to establish a new north side teaching facility.

2.03 Upon request, U3A ACT submitted details of its physical requirements to the Department of Disabilities, Housing & Community Services (DHCS) on 15 Dec 2008 and is currently involved in discussions with the appointed architect for this and other community centres, Paul Barnett Design Group.

2.04 Early this year, U3A ACT was also advised that it had been successful in its bid to obtain funding, under the 2008-09 Community Support & Infrastructure Grants Program, to purchase furniture, to a total value of \$10,000, for the new facility.

2.05 It would be of major concern to U3A ACT – and, we would assume, to the 44 other community groups, who have been offered space at Cook, Melrose, Holt and Weston – if this Inquiry were to seek to overturn, or delay, the process, for establishing the above much needed Regional Community Centres, given the very considerable amount of time already expended, by those potentially affected community groups, in advancing their respective causes.

3.00 U3A's Interest in the Cook Regional Community Centre:

3.01 As of now, U3A ACT's only identifiable home is the space it sub-leases from the Council of the Ageing (ACT), at the Hughes Community Centre. COTA (ACT), in turn, leases the entire Centre from the ACT Government.

3.02 Here, U3A ACT has prime occupancy of 1 large and 3 small spaces for the conduct of courses. It also has shared use of the large community hall, for its program of lunchtime forums and special gatherings, and maintains a small volunteer-run office and storeroom. However, the space at Hughes is only sufficient for the conduct of a limited number of courses and, physically, the spaces leased are less than optimum. The majority of U3A ACT's music group rehearsals and courses, etc, are therefore currently run from over 50 private homes and/or hired venues around Canberra (clubs, church halls, University House, etc), whilst almost all management tasks are undertaken from private homes.

3.03 With 40% of U3A ACT's membership now living in the northern half of Canberra – a proportion expected to increase as demographics change – the decision of the ACT Government to close Cook Primary School was seen as a rare opportunity to establish a Northside base from which to expand its offering of courses to a steadily growing membership.

3.04 In addition to the space to be leased for general courses, the ACT Government's proposal, that the former school hall be leased out on an hourly basis for performing arts groups, potentially meets the needs of several of our instrumental and choral groups – both in terms of weekly practice sessions and occasional performances. A new prospect, a 'men's shed', is also currently being explored and may prove feasible at Cook.

4.00 U3A's Expenditure of Effort to date in respect of Cook:

4.01 The current round of effort, to acquire affordable space at Cook, began in October 2007, when contact was made with Purdon Associates Pty Ltd, the first consultants appointed by the Department of Territory & Municipal Services (TAMS) to advise the ACT Government on planning options for use of the vacant buildings and adjacent lands arising from previously announced school closures.

4.02 Although U3A ACT had been making general representations for assistance to the ACT Government for several years prior to this, the new impetus instigated considerable internal investigation and review – to define U3A ACT's real needs – and lots of contact with the consultant, site inspections of all potentially available facilities, and participation in community forums, etc, prior to the ACT Government's consideration of that consultant's report in early 2008.

4.03 Despite election promises in early May 2008 that the ACT Government intended to spend \$24.6million on a wide series of proposals for utilising vacant schools and adjacent lands, including a regional community centre, focusing on arts and culture, at Cook, U3A ACT was somewhat surprised to find that another consultant study was announced, to consult with communities 'on how best to use land adjacent to proposed community hubs'. Subsequently, U3A ACT attended a number of the community forums conducted by the new consultant, GHD.

4.04 In June 2008, U3A submitted a formal application to TAMS for leased space at Cook. On 7 July 2008, TAMS acknowledged that 'expression of interest' and indicated that DHCS was taking over responsibility for the community facilities to be established at Cook and elsewhere.

4.05 On 2 September 2008, the ACT Chief Minister issued a press release which indicated that U3A would be amongst those organisations to be offered tenancy at one of the proposed Regional Community Centres. It was later confirmed that U3A would be offered approximately 150m² of space at Cook.

- 4.06 Since then, considerable time and effort has been expended by U3A ACT in:
- (1) Attending briefings and site inspections, etc;
 - (2) Refining U3A ACT's detailed needs;
 - (3) Lodging a successful application, under DHCS's 2008-09 Community Support & Infrastructure Grants Program, to purchase furniture for the new facility, to a total value of \$10,000. A Deed of Grant has recently been signed;
 - (4) Lodging an unsuccessful application, under DHCS's 2008-09 Community Support & Infrastructure Grants Program, to purchase equipment for the new facility, to a total value of \$14,800; and
 - (5) Preparing and submitting detailed Tenancy and Room Data Sheets so that the project manager, Hindmarsh, and the design consultant, Paul Barnett Design Group, can commence design and documentation (including the identification of the specific space to be allocated to each of the 45 community organisations) for the 4 refurbishment projects at the Cook, Melrose, Holt and Weston Regional Community Centres.

5.00 Conclusion:

5.01 Despite the protests amongst communities who have lost their neighbourhood schools, it is hoped that this submission will serve to remind the Standing Committee that there is also a bright side to the school closures. Indeed, some 45 community organisations, including U3A ACT, stand to benefit and, given the wide reach of many of those organisations, this will serve to bring life back into now deserted buildings and should substantially assist local shopping centres. By upgrading former school halls to serve as Regional Community Centres, this will also meet an unfulfilled community need.

5.02 Finally, it must not be overlooked that considerable time and effort has now been expended by a lot of people in progressing these new visions to where they now stand, and that any eleventh hour reversal could quite rightly produce grounds for widespread dissatisfaction.

Gary Johnson
President

For further communications, please contact either me f on ph 62952270 email garyjohnson12@hotmail.com or our U3A Project Officer, Garth Setchell, on ph/fax 62901100 email setchell@pcug.org.au. Please note that Garth will be unavailable between 28 April and 24 May 2009.