

## **Executive Summary**

### **Student Feedback on the 2010 Yearlong Course Program - Report December 2010**

*"U3A is a wonderful opportunity for all us seniors, the program is diverse with many opportunities and choices. I hope this will continue to grow"*

A Student Feedback Policy was introduced by U3A Melbourne City in 2010 as a means of providing students a formal voice in the ongoing development of our education program. Their feedback was envisaged as providing valuable information for tutors, course coordination and administration teams in reviewing, planning and delivering a high quality program to members in the future.

The Policy was embraced on a voluntary basis by tutors of 35 yearlong courses (spanning language, Humanities/Social Sciences, creative and brain-game courses), and 347 students attending classes early in August 2010 (84% attendees). Students provided written feedback to a series of questions eliciting comments about their experience of that particular course and the course program overall.

We found that members are attracted to courses for a variety of reasons, but predominantly because of a longstanding interest in a particular area, and the desire to learn or improve their knowledge and skills in a subject. The opportunity to learn with 'like minded' people and the positive reputation of the tutor or course were also reported as common motivating factors.

- *"A long-time interest, but no opportunity to learn German at school and this course suggested it could cope with a beginner"*
- *"The challenge of a difficult game and the opportunity to learn more about the theory"*
- *"The news from other people how all admire the tutor and the program, especially the time and preparation she puts in "*
- *"A small group interested in the same thing and the friendships around the activity separate from other things in my life"*

Members' expectations were not disappointed, with 95% reporting a good match between the advertised course description and the course as delivered, and a remarkable 98% rating highly their overall enjoyment of the course.

In examining the main reasons for students' enjoyment of their course, there is considerable consistency across the different types of courses and an emphasis on the

class atmosphere and way classes are run. While students report enjoying their mastery and engagement with a specific language, game, creative activity or subject, the context for learning and practice appeared to contribute most to their enjoyment.

Language students, for example, enjoyed most the camaraderie, interaction and group discussion between members, as well as the variety of class activities. Some nominated the tutors native origins and teaching approach as significant to their enjoyment.

- *"The friendship of the diverse group of German speaking people, different backgrounds, is fascinating"*
- *"Very pleased with the variety and course content, which has been comprehensive and directed at a level which is easy to follow considering Japanese is such a difficult language to learn"*

Students in Humanities/Social Science subjects identified the core presentation and subsequent discussion as most enjoyable aspect of the course, along with the diversity of resources chosen by their tutor.

- *"I enjoy most the discussion of current affairs and linking that in with the economic course theory- so in other words linking the practical to the theory"*

The empathy and commonality between class members was most important for students in the Creative courses, a number of which are self-lead, followed by their enjoyment of the creative activity itself.

- *"The wide variety of crafts and the company of like minded people"*

Engagement with the complexities and challenges of their chosen game provided the greatest source of enjoyment for Brain-game students, along with the helpful and friendly atmosphere of the class across differing skill level.

- *"Brain challenge and companionship "*

The significance of the way classes are run to members' enjoyment and learning was reinforced by students' feedback about course delivery. In reporting on what they most liked about how the course was organised and run, students highlighted the informality and friendliness of the class (31%); the organisation and activity mix of classes (23%); the tutor's professionalism, enthusiasm, knowledge (15%) and patient support (7%).

- *"Friendly atmosphere- casual, no pressure- but still guidance"*
- *"It was well organised- lots of information given and notes on the web to read"*
- *Very patient teacher, with good class plan, good preparation, good materials and sensible homework"*

The egalitarian nature of the class and sharing of responsibility in leadership or skill development was more specifically nominated by others. Unsurprisingly then, 97% students stated that they were able to participate in the class as much as they would have liked.

- *"Includes class participants and respectful of each person's ideas" (Shakespeare)*

Students' satisfaction with their course was further evident when asked to comment on changes to course content or delivery, and the course generally. Only a minority of students suggested any changes, the majority commending the thoroughness of the existing curriculum, the tutor's expertise in selecting content, and in running the class in

such a way as to accommodate students with differing skill, knowledge and confidence levels.

- *"Good content- language very well covered and the cultural area diverse and fascinating."*
- *"It caters for beginners as well as regular players, so it's difficult to see how it could be improved"*
- *"As a result of the tutor's wide knowledge in music, I have been exposed to an ever increasing number of choral pieces, both classical and of the lighter variety"*

The nature of this consistent positive feedback about course delivery indicates that tutors are tailoring their approach to the learning needs of members and essentially teaching in line with best practice principles of adult education. Comments suggest tutors do respect and engage with students as equals, facilitating self-directed learning within a non-threatening open atmosphere. Additionally the use of diverse resources and activities within the course stimulates and sustains student interest on the one hand, and also promotes learning by practical application of new skills and knowledge.

Where students did suggest course changes, these pointed to areas where good practice could be further enhanced. In respect to course delivery, suggestions primarily related to factors that would stimulate and reinforce learning. In particular a greater use of audio-visual resources by the tutor, more class notes and advance reference reading, more or less homework, a greater emphasis on basics and revision, and in the case of language students more emphasis on oral exercises.

- *"Ideally some audiovisual content might help, but the discussion is just right"*
- *"Suggested reading to accompany the lectures, which would enhance the interest and focus question time"*
- *"More role-plays to be prepared 2 by 2, using what we are supposed to know"*

Some students requested more frequent classes (especially where run fortnightly) or longer classes to consolidate learning, while other wanted 'time-out' breaks in the yearlong program.

Students were also highly enthusiastic about the quality and benefits of the course program overall, and U3A Melbourne City as an organisation. Many commented on the excellence and diversity of courses on offer, the accessibility of the program and its contribution to seniors' wellbeing through friendships and stimulation. The dedication and generosity of volunteers, both tutors and 'behind-the-scenes' people, was strongly acknowledged.

- *"I really appreciate all the effort which enables Third Age students to keep on learning at low cost, suitable times and friendly places"*
- *"I congratulate all concerned. The variety of courses, the tremendous amount of work done by the office and tutors- all on a voluntary basis and with limited resources. We are very lucky to be part of U3A Melbourne"*

Nevertheless at an organisation level, students also suggested changes to future course planning and administration. Programming suggestions included new topics for future courses, especially in the Arts and Health areas; the provision of language courses at progressive levels from introductory to advanced; the value of native speaking tutors; and engagement of tutors (rather than self-lead groups) where skill and technique

development is important. More short courses were requested, and greater provision for members with special needs.

Student management feedback centred on the need for fairness to other members, be it in freeing up class places by irregular attendees and 'drop-outs'; respect for others in waiting outside or exiting classrooms; and less dominance of a class by individuals.

- *"People who don't turn up regularly should be asked to leave"*

Accommodation problems noted included Ross House classroom size, proximity and noise; the lack of room consistency across the year; and access to equipment at the Multicultural Hub.

**In conclusion**, student feedback would indicate that a diverse quality program is being offered by our volunteer tutors that goes a long way towards meeting students' needs. Moreover, from the high level of participation in the feedback process and the wealth of student comment, we can conclude that the policy objective of giving students a formal voice has been well met for those attending during the survey period.

Their feedback identifies the course aspects and teaching approaches that most contribute to their learning and enjoyment, affirming good practice of a learner centred approach to adult education and providing tutors with information to review and plan future courses, thereby meeting the second policy objective.

The student comments also provide valuable information for recruitment and diversifying our course program; developing Tutor Workshops and other resources; and improving course administration practices- all aspects of the third objective. Additionally, the survey findings and richness of student comments give the organisation a unique resource for future promotion and garnering support within the wider community.

Finally, the report makes recommendations regarding the distribution and use of the survey findings within the organisation so as to further the achievement of the policy objectives. In acknowledging the limitations placed on the reported findings by the lack of feedback from students who had previously withdrawn from the course, or were absent during the survey period, the report also recommends that the Committee of Management give priority to capturing the views of such students in 2011 over a repetition of this snapshot view of yearlong courses.

Julie Nankervis  
Course Coordinator

The Committee would encourage everyone interested to read the more detailed report on student feedback. The full copy of the report is available for download on our website [www.u3amelb.org.au](http://www.u3amelb.org.au). A limited number of hard copies will be available in the office for members to read or borrow on a short term basis. For further information or comment about the report please contact Julie Nankervis via the office: 03 9639 5209 or email [citymelb@u3a.org.au](mailto:citymelb@u3a.org.au).