

A brief summary of the Power of Connection

Ten weeks of fieldwork and researching the support offered by u3a in alleviating social isolation, resulted in the publication of our thesis *The Power of Connection: u3a's Innovative Activities against Social Isolation in the UK*. During these ten weeks, we wanted to find out how social isolation is experienced by (semi-) retired people, and how they try to alleviate it through various means, such as with the activities offered by u3a. To get a complete picture, we participated in various online and local activities to 'become' part of u3a, and we spoke to many u3a members as well as staff from the Trust to create a bottom-up understanding of how exactly u3a alleviates social isolation. After ten weeks of participating in the Interest Groups Online and local activities with Croydon u3a, visiting Croydon's GM's, conducting over forty interviews as well as engaging in many casual conversations, we have concluded that u3a members receive support from u3a in alleviating social isolation in several ways.

The benefits of being a u3a member seem to be endless as frequently stated by the members we spoke to. Given the focus of our research, we specifically looked into the benefits related to decreased feelings of social isolation, the creation of social connections, and the individual wellbeing of u3a members (both physically and mentally) and thus incorporated this in our research report.

For many u3a members, the inevitable process of retirement asked for adjustment to an unknown phase in life. Feelings of social isolation and loneliness occurred among several members, either prior to or during their u3a membership, whereas others were prevented from such feelings because of u3a. Social support, pre-retirement planning, and leisure activities can regulate this. Thus, the most prominent way u3a helps to alleviate social isolation is through the group-based nature of u3a's interventions which provides social connections. Members identify the social contacts with u3a members and belonging in that community as determinants to alleviate social isolation. A second way of support is revealed here, namely that u3a activities also assist in members' wellbeing and overall quality of life. With participating in u3a activities, the social contacts alleviate social isolation and the participation itself gives structure to retired life, enabling general or physical exercise, providing cognitive stimulation, and it fosters feelings of enjoyment and happiness either through the contacts or activities. Then, the last specific way in which u3a offers support in the alleviation of social isolation, is through

the Interest Groups Online. This online platform allows members to participate who are e.g. housebound, or combine u3a activities with other responsibilities. As they cannot always attend activities locally, they are still included in u3a's reach and those members confirmed this online tool to be a mitigator for decreased or eradicated feelings of social isolation.

The battle against social isolation is an ongoing one. For those included in the scope of u3a, it has been effective in reducing social isolation through offering a (new) social network, and subsequent benefits resulting in structure to retired life, wellbeing, and overall life satisfaction. Our participants came forward with stories about previous feelings of loneliness or isolation, whether it was related to retirement or widowhood, which u3a helped to resolve. But, it does not rule out the possibility of feeling lonely. U3a's activities, the mental and physical benefits, and the social connections are a start, but it is not the perfect remedy. However, it goes a long way. Given its effectiveness to alleviate social isolation according to our participants, they urge u3a to take action to be more inclusive and welcoming of under-represented groups (e.g. men), particularly to those who may be more at risk of social isolation (e.g. people with disabilities). Moreover, they urge u3a to expand to other nations to improve other people's quality of life as well, as a result of these various benefits. In the end, u3a is often described by its members as a 'lifeline', 'godsend' or members 'would not know where they would be without it'.

Sherida ten Lande and Tess Tolsma

University of Utrecht

August 2024