

U3A Melbourne City - 2012 Short Course Student Feedback

Final Report - April 2013

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Summary

During 2012 written student feedback was sought from new and revised short courses. Thirty tutors participated, with over 200 students providing feedback (78% average course attendance). Students commented very positively on the running of their course and the benefits derived.

They overwhelmingly rated their particular course as very enjoyable (93%), stimulating (94%), and strongly endorsed the tutor's encouragement of participation (94%) and the generation of a friendly, supportive atmosphere for learning (93%).

The professionalism of tutors was also highly rated in terms of delivering well organised sessions (88%), with high quality content (88%), clear and interesting presentation (91%) and useful learning resources and activities (87%). There was less agreement about the course length, with a third indicating a preference for a longer course to further explore the topic or consolidate the skills involved.

At a personal level, students benefited significantly from their participation in the course. The majority reported positively on the knowledge gained in the subject area or the skills acquired. Others noted the inspiration and motivation generated to extend their study or practice into their everyday lives. Other identified improved health and social benefits as important outcomes.

As such, we can conclude that the various short courses were enjoyable and well run along lines that support learning on the part of older adults. The educational and social goals of the program appear to have been met and the provision of short courses is highly valued by students. Valuable suggestions were made for extending the program in specific areas (especially sciences) and about new topics, thereby providing guidance to the Course Coordination Team in further development of the program.

Introduction

U3A Melbourne City introduced a policy of written student feedback in 2010 to enable students to comment formally on their experiences of courses attended, and to provide useful information to tutors and coordinators for planning and delivery of future courses.

The report on the 2010 year-long courses provided valuable insights into what attracted members to particular courses, and the aspects of the course they most enjoyed - in particular the friendly and participatory nature of classes; the mix of class activities and types of information provision; the stimulation and knowledge gained; and the expertise and passion of the tutors. We have since followed-up on suggested changes and reinforced good adult learning practices at Tutors Meetings, during liaison about course proposals and in recruiting new tutors.

Given the stability in year-long courses offered, the target of student feedback in 2011 and 2012 has been the growing short course program. During 2012 sixty short courses were run covering a diverse range of topics, with over half (33) being new courses, offered in many instances by tutors new to our program.

The focus for 2012 feedback was on the new courses, and to a lesser extent those revised or repeated for the first time. Participation in the feedback process is on a voluntary basis for both tutors and students. This report documents the perceptions and comments by some 200 students attending those courses.

Feedback Implementation

Feedback forms, an accompanying Tip Sheet and letter were given to relevant tutors towards the course end, with a request to distribute/collect the feedback forms at the last class. Based on previous findings, the 2012 Form had been revised to enable quicker rating and comment by students at the end of the class (see appendix). Questions asked about students' enjoyment and benefits of attendance; their perceptions about how the course was run; any suggested changes and general comments on our program.

Feedback was provided on 30 courses, 23 of which were new courses and seven revised/repeat ones (see appendix). As such comment was received on 70% of the new courses in the 2012 program. A total of 204 forms were returned, representing 57% of the 358 students enrolled overall in the 30 courses. With drop-outs inevitably experienced, this number of returns represents a higher 94% of last day attendance and 78% of course average attendance, thereby providing a relatively sound basis for analysis and interpretation.

Key Findings

Key aspects of course (Question 1 & 2)

At the outset students were asked to rate a total of nine different aspects of the course they attended covering students overall enjoyment, course content, presentation and educational approaches. Students were then invited to expand on any of their ratings by providing comments in the second question.

Each aspect with sample quotations from students is reported as follows:

1. Enjoyable

Overall 93% of the students indicated that they enjoyed their course very much, giving it a "Strongly agree" rating. A further 6% were positive as they ticked the "Somewhat agree" category. Some commented on their overall enjoyment, with others noting the tutor's enthusiasm, the insights gained and group discussion as specific sources of enjoyment.

- *"Totally enjoyable and interesting" (Philosopher's Cave)*
- *"Tutors enthusiasm and passion made the sessions so enjoyable" (Architectural Walks)*
- *"Very enjoyable, an illuminating way of examining our everyday world" (Physics)*
- *"I have enjoyed rediscovering some loved poets and the interactions and stories from fellow participants" (Australian Poetry)*

2. Stimulating

Overall 94% of the students indicated that they found their course very stimulating, giving it a "Strongly agree" rating. The remaining 6% were also positive, ticking the "Somewhat agree" category. For some, the range of information, materials and questions posed challenged them to engage more with the topic.

- *"It was a fascinating and stimulating introduction to the topic." (Medieval Cathedrals)*
- *"I considered it quite engaging and stimulating" (Renewable Energy)*
- *"The range of plays and questions posed by tutor each week very stimulating" (Theatre through the Ages)*

3. Course was the right length

Responses regarding course length were varied. The majority, 65% strongly agreed that their course was the right length. However 24% somewhat agreed and 7% disagreed, these members wanting the course to run for a longer period or the session to be slightly longer given the amount of material to be covered, skills to be learned and their enthusiasm for the particular course.

- *"I think six weeks was a good length of time and the content was covered in that time" (Breath and Movement- Beginners)*
- *"I would really like to be able to continue learning Spanish at Beginners level. The course was too short" (Spanish-Introduction)*
- *"Content suffered a bit from having to squeeze into 1 hour sessions" (Finances in Retirement)*
- *"Very pleased that there will be part two because there is so much fascinating and challenging information to get to grips with." (Astronomy & Cosmology- Pt 1)*

4. Friendly supportive atmosphere

Across all short courses 93% students strongly agreed that their course was conducted in a friendly and supportive atmosphere. Comments related to the support and encouragement which tutors gave their students as well as rapport between class members and tutors.

- *"Terrific presenter who had immense patience with less science trained participants like me" (Physics)*
- *"Strong connection and trust built between group members and supported by facilitators" (Creative Journaling)*
- *"The tutor encouraged participants to have a coffee following each class" (Cosmology - Pt 2)*

A further 8% somewhat agreed with this statement, in one instance at least agreement being qualified by the manner of participation by other students.

- *"One or two dominated the interaction, and not in a conversational tone, but argumentative" (Analysing Religion)*

5. Student participation & interaction encouraged

All respondents agreed with this statement (94% strongly and 6% somewhat agreed). Comments showed that students appreciated this encouragement to participate by tutors, regarding questions and discussion, and in leading class activities.

- *"There was plenty of opportunity to participate and tutor requested a simple statement of expectations at the start" (Renewable Energy)*
- *"Students are able to share their thoughts and ideas and interaction from each other is encouraged" (Putting Focus Back In Your Life)*
- *"I particularly enjoyed our individual participation/preparation of poet's work" (Australian Poetry)*
- *"The tutor provided a stimulating and interesting environment in which there was a high level of student participation" (Philosophers' Cave)*

6. Well-organised sessions

Most students (88%) strongly agreed that their classes were well-organised, while a further 9% somewhat agreed with this statement.

- *"The classes were well run, with a lot of thought put into the presentation and development of concepts, with all options and energy alternatives covered" (Renewable Energy)*
- *"The tutor kept things moving, hence we learnt a lot of vocab and tunes" (French through Song)*
- *"Tutor was always prepared and supplied us with clear outlines" (Architectural Walks)*

Qualifying the rating, several students noted the lack of time in each session to cover the material.

- *"Somewhat rushed - didn't necessarily have time to cover everything, take questions" (Finances in Retirement)*

7. High quality content

Correspondingly, 88% students strongly agreed that the course content was of a high quality, noting the comprehensiveness and excellence of information presented, often illustrated through the tutor's personal engagement in the area

- *"The content was very good and exposed us all to the language & sounds & pronunciation" (Spanish-Introduction)*
- *"I love the blend of meditation, art and writing" (Creative Journaling)*
- *"Fascinating content, hope it goes on next year" (Cosmology Pt 2)*
- *"Personal accounts of Tutors' experience and creations in the area – most relevant and illuminating" (Infrastructure)*

A further 9% somewhat agreed with this statement and qualified their responses.

- *"Content dependent on members' ability to understand" (Physics of Everyday Things)*
- *"The courses content was good but too much was covered in each session, and it all tended to be rushed and move to a lecture format" (Economics & Philosophy)*
- *"A more structured approach to the content of each session would improve the course" (Philosophers Cave)*

8. Clear & interesting presentation

It was evident that most tutors provided information in a clear and interesting way, given that 92% of students strongly agreed and a further 7% somewhat agreeing with this proposition.

- *"The tutor was very good at explaining and making the subject come alive" (Medieval English Literature)*
- *"Really appreciated the Tutor's approach of explaining what each exercise was designed to achieve" (Fit for Retirement)*
- *"Each session was well prepared by the Tutor who takes great effort in explaining, clarifying and highlighting important phases in modern drama" (Great Plays)*

9. Useful learning resources & activities

Eighty-seven percent of respondents strongly agreed that their course incorporated useful learning resources and activities. A further 10% somewhat agreed with this statement. Students appreciated

the tutor's attention to things such as the range of class activities/homework; handouts, audio-visual and other class resources, and links for further study that would engage and extend them.

- *"The Tutor is very encouraging and thoughtful about supplying materials and extension ideas" (Painting and Advanced Drawing)*
- *"Very comprehensive course notes that made this course a real learning experience of a very important and interesting subject matter" (Astronomy & Cosmology Pt 1)*
- *"Useful links to U Tube and texts" (Great Plays)*
- *"It was good to have to be disciplined and just do it!" (Speaking with Confidence)*
- *"Really, really appreciated the chance to actually try out an ergonomic chair" (Ergonomics)*

Suggested changes to the content of the course or how it was run (Question 3)

Students were asked if they had any suggestions for changes in what the course covered or how the course was run. Only 50% of students responded to this question. Of these many students saw no need for change, commenting on the excellence of course content and their enjoyment of the subject matter. They stated that there was no need to alter something that is working well.

- *"I wouldn't change a thing!" (Get Healthy Pt 1)*
- *"It seems to fulfil all I would expect. No changes, please" (Theatre Through the Ages)*
- *"This course is so well run that it would be impossible to make any improvements" (Cosmology Pt 2)*

The majority of suggested changes about how the course was run related to course or session length. Many members wanted a longer or more in-depth course, aligning with comments in the previous question on course length.

- *"Two hours is good, but 12 weeks is too short" (Painting and Advanced Drawing)*
- *"I would welcome an extension of the course to even say at least twice the number of weeks duration as there is still much to learn & assimilate in this subject" (Meditation)*
- *"I would like to see the course extended to further explore the content of Ulysses" (James Joyce Ulysses)*

In other instances suggestions related to the mix or pace of class activities, student preparation and provision of class summary notes/resources, and the need for clearer prerequisites.

- *"If the course was longer would be good to work in pairs some of the time communicating in Spanish with each other." (Spanish-Introduction)*
- *"Maybe reading the French words a few more times to get the correct pronunciation and accent before the singing" (French Through Song)*
- *"People could be encouraged to do homework" (Economic Philosophy)*
- *"Maybe some audio tapes for home if possible" (Thai Chi- Beginners)*
- *"There should be some pre-requisite level of knowledge – otherwise the slow people hinder efficient use of class time" (Astronomy & Cosmology Pt 1)*

No particular themes emerged in terms of changes to content, as comments tended to be course specific where students suggested greater focus or depth on specific topics.

- *"I would suggest more basic grammar as well as a general overview" (Spanish- Introduction)*
- *"Perhaps encourage info about recipes that use the 'new' vegies, grains, fruits we learnt and talked about" (Get Healthy Pt 1)*
- *"Maybe a concentration on individual cathedrals i.e. York, Westminster." (Medieval Cathedrals)*
- *"Maybe more information about key figures/influences in modern theatre, comparison of other plays by the same author or look at how other play writers tackled the same issues e.g. marriage... source more Australian plays" (Great Plays)*

What did you get out of attending the course? (Question 4)

This question asked students to comment on what they gained from participating in the course i.e. what were their perceived personal outcomes. Examples such as knowledge, confidence, skills, inspiration and companionship were given as prompts.

Seventy-five percent of students provided comments, with a majority (62%) nominating as a key outcome the knowledge and understanding gained of the subject area or the skills acquired.

- *"I now feel that I am better equipped to evaluate books and newspaper articles on renewable energy and global warming" (Renewable Energy)*
- *"A huge insight into how to interpret Medieval language and literature" (Medieval English Literature)*
- *"This short course has given me the knowledge to put together a short program of exercises that I can do each day (hopefully!)" (Fit for Retirement)*
- *"Certainly an increase in knowledge & history spiced with little anecdotes to whet the appetite" (Architectural Walks)*

However a number of students also mentioned motivation and inspiration to explore the topic/practice further, improved health and wellbeing, confidence and social benefits as outcomes from the course they attended.

Motivation and inspiration

- *"Motivation to get my affairs organised" (Finances in Retirement)*
- *"Motivation to vary my diet and confidence to shop for that variety" (Get Healthy Pt 1)*
- *"Gives one the inspiration for further study of this important subject" (Infrastructure)*

Health benefits

- *"A great improvement/relief from chronic lumber back pain" (Yoga/Belly Dancing)*
- *"Help in sorting out my feelings of being overloaded & overwhelmed- making it manageable" (Putting Focus Back into your Life)*
- *"I feel more relaxed, focussed and able to think more clearly" (Meditation)*

Confidence

- *"Confidence in speaking in other classes" (French Through Song)*
- *"Quite a bit of several things, especially confidence and knowledge" (Speaking with Confidence)*
- *"Confidence in exploring Joyce. Broad understanding of its structure" (James Joyce Ulysses)*

Fun/Social benefits

- *"Company of interesting people and stimulating discussions" (Astronomy & Cosmology Pt 1)*
- *"Social contact with like minded participants" (Great Plays)*
- *"Found it a very interesting and entertaining two hours" (Philosophers' Cave)*

Additional comments about the course or the U3A Program overall (Question 5)

Students were given the opportunity to make any further comments about their course or the course program overall in the final question. Over one half (59%) of respondents chose to do so.

A number of students commented positively on their course experience noting the excellence or importance of the course and their desire for follow-up courses.

- *"This course was very well run by a competent presenter with great knowledge to impart based on very recent experience" (Renewable Energy)*
- *Good idea for a course as there are many older people wanting to clear baggage & find motivation to do this" (Putting Focus Back in Life)*
- *"Perhaps another/two short courses" (French through Song)*

- *"I cannot wait to take part in the second semester. This is U3A at its best" (Astronomy & Cosmology Pt 1)*

Several students noted the need for additional courses in areas already covered, particularly more scientific courses, health and language offerings:

- *"There is a lack of science subjects overall" (Physics)*
- *"This course has given me a 'taste' of Spanish but so sad there is nowhere to go forward to" (Spanish- Introduction)*
- *"I would like to see more of this kind of program, exploring such areas of our life as: mental health, exercise, longevity, happiness, well being" (Get Healthy Pt 1)*

A few members made specific suggestions for the planning of new short course topics:

- *"I'd like a Corporate Governance course" (Renewable Energy)*
- *"A photography course would be a useful addition" (Cosmology Pt 2)*
- *"Possibly for office volunteers –a short course on telephone dos' & don'ts" (Speaking with Confidence)*

Others noted the value of short courses and the excellence of the program overall. Some expressed gratitude that they were able to access this wonderful resource.

- *"A wonderful chance to discover satisfying pursuits- short courses are in particular are great tastings" (Painting and Advanced Drawing)*
- *"I am enjoying short courses that blend in with my lifestyle" (Renewable Energy)*
- *"I'm a new member. This has been my first involvement and I am absolutely thrilled with what I have experienced" (Medieval Cathedrals)*
- *"Great course, great ideas, good presenters- keep on doing what you are doing" (Renewable Energy)*
- *"Well done U3A, this was a fabulous new class!" (James Joyce Ulysses)*
- *"The course program of U3A Melbourne City is awesome. I consider U3A to be one of the most life-enhancing offerings available to the lucky senior citizens" (Theatre Through the Ages)*

Discussion

The relatively high participation rate by short course tutors and attending students is a strong endorsement of the Student Feedback Policy. Students have welcomed the opportunity to formally voice their opinions, and tutors have been open to receiving their feedback.

Students strongly expressed their enjoyment of the courses offered and were very positive about the professionalism, knowledge and enthusiasm of the tutors. There was strong positive feedback on all aspects of course delivery covered in the questionnaire. These were factors that students had previously told us were important to their learning and enjoyment, and are also key components in a flexible learner centred approach to teaching seniors. In particular, teaching approaches that support differing student needs, encourage participation, and provide relevant information and reinforcement via a mix of resources and hands-on application.

Such positive feedback suggests that the short course educational program is well run, meeting member needs and highly valued. The key findings are consistent with the 2011 findings and indicate a continued high educational standard in line with practices that support adult learning.

The new question on members perceived personal outcomes showed that students gained not only knowledge and skills but were also motivated and inspired to continue with an area of study or practice. Other outcomes noted include health benefits, confidence building and companionship

with other class members, all important aspects of our U3A mission and contribution to positive ageing.

There is strong support for the growth and diversity of the short courses program, and useful suggestions on topic areas that can be expanded or introduced in the future. However, without the commitment and expertise of the volunteer tutors neither the benefits experienced, the diverse program, nor its future growth would be possible. The students' feedback demonstrates a keen appreciation of tutors' contribution, and also provides pointers for future tutor support, planning and recruitment by the Course Coordination Team.

Queries will inevitably be raised about the views of students who had withdrawn from the courses and did not participate in the feedback process. Would they have rated their experiences as highly? Overall data collected by the U3A office during 2012 about the reason members withdraw, indicates that the vast majority do so for personal, family and health reasons, rather than dissatisfaction with the course. This as such, would support the overall positive feedback reported here.

Recommendations

For stakeholders to benefit from this student feedback it is recommended that:

1. The Committee of Management make this report available to all Tutors and interested members via the website and the U3A Melbourne City office.
2. An Executive Summary of this report be distributed to tutors and published on the U3A Melbourne City website.
3. The report be discussed at the Tutors' Workshops/Meetings to gain their perceptions on the findings and to reinforce positive tutoring approaches with senior students.
4. The Course Coordination Team considers suggestions by members in respect of short course development and organisation of the U3A Melbourne City education program.
5. The Committee of Management and Promotions Committee use the report findings and student comments as appropriate in terms of grant application and promotion to members and the wider community.
6. Short course participants continue to be surveyed to provide input into continuous improvement of the U3A Melbourne City short course offerings.
7. The reasons and views of students who withdraw from courses, and hence not participants in the feedback survey, continue to be sought to inform program improvement and development.

Student Course Feedback Form



Course Name

Tutor's name

Date

Dear U3A member, please

- complete this form today at the end of the session. Your response will help us to improve our U3A program. Your feedback is confidential. And you don't have to add your name.
- Fold the form and give it to the tutor before you leave the class. You may also return the form directly to our office after the class if you prefer.

1. Choose/tick one of the three options below to rate different aspects of this course -

	Disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Enjoyable			
Stimulating			
Friendly supportive atmosphere			
Course was the right length			
Well-organised sessions			
High quality content			
Clear & interesting presentation			
Student participation & interaction encouraged			
Useful learning resources & activities			

2. Please comment/elaborate on your ratings above:

3. Can you suggest any changes to the content of the course or how it is run?

4. What did you get out of attending the course? (eg Knowledge? Confidence? Skills? Inspiration? Companionship etc) **Please specify-**

5. Do you have any other comments to make about this course or our course program overall?

Your name (optional)
form.

Thank you for your time and thought in completing this

Appendix- Participating Short Courses

February/March 2012 (cited as in text)
Analysing Religion & Spirituality (*Analysing Religion*)
Architectural Heritage Walks (*Architectural Walks*)
Enjoying Australian Poetry (*Australian Poetry*)
Get Healthy: Easy Steps to Improve Your Health Pt1 (*Get Healthy- Pt1*)
Great Plays of the 20th Century (*Great Plays*)
Medieval English Cathedrals (*Medieval Cathedrals*)
Painting and Advanced Drawing
Renewable Energy
Why Spend Money on Infrastructure (*Infrastructure*)

April/May 2012
Astronomy & Cosmology Pt1: the Large Scale Cosmos (*Astronomy & Cosmology Pt1*)
Breath and Movement: Beginners
Introducing James Joyce's Ulysses (*James Joyce Ulysses*)
Meditation: Inner Power, Inner Peace (*Meditation*)
Thai Chi- Beginners

June/July 2012
Economics & Philosophy: Money, Morality and Materialism (*Economics & Philosophy*)
The Philosophers Cave: A Community of Enquiry (*Philosophers Cave*)
Medieval English Literature: Riddle, Play and Vision (*Medieval English Literature*)

August/September 2012
Creative Journaling
Managing Your Finances in Retirement (*Finances in Retirement*)
Physics of Everyday Things (*Physics*)

October/November 2012
Breath & Movement: Continuing
Cosmology Pt 2: Earth in its Cosmic Context (Cosmology Pt 2)
Ergonomics for the Home/Work Office (*Ergonomics*)
Fit for Retirement
French Through Song
Hatha Yoga/Middle Eastern Belly Dancing (*Yoga/Belly Dancing*)
Putting Focus Back in Your Life
Spanish- A Short Introduction (*Spanish - Introduction*)
Speaking with Confidence
Theatre Through the Ages

Acknowledgements

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