

Case Studies on Adult Learning

University of the Third Age (UTA)

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ADULT LEARNING

Knowledge Centre

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"After age 50? I'm going to university!" This is how the University of the Third Age (UTA) at the Université de Sherbrooke preempts any questions and provides an answer to anyone 50 and older who wants to pursue an education and lifelong learning.

Guy Stringer's assessment of the UTA's 25 years at the Université de Sherbrooke (2001)¹ recalls the goal of the pilot project, which was to give English lessons to seniors. A survey based on eleven predetermined categories then helped to narrow down seniors' interests. The author points out that it was difficult to draw meaningful conclusions from the gathered data, but 107 people chose English and 33 chose French, although the questionnaire did not mention any languages.

1- Program description

1-1- Context

The main goal of the UTA programs for 25 years² has been to break seniors out of their isolation by facilitating knowledge acquisition, promoting interaction and cultural and social involvement and, finally, supporting them in their desire to achieve³.

The UTA offers seniors the opportunity to be students in their own right at the Université de Sherbrooke so that society has a new wave of dynamic and responsible senior citizens.

1-2- Target population

The UTA is for individuals aged 50 and older who want to pursue an education and lifelong learning in order to establish a new social network, learn new things, improve their knowledge and share it with others so as to contribute to the changes happening around them.

¹ Guy Stringer (2001). Les vingt-cinq années de l'Université du troisième âge (UTA) de l'Université de Sherbrooke. Éditions de l'UTA, "L'avenir de la mémoire" collection.

Online: http://www.usherbrooke.ca/liaison_vol29-37/vol36/09/liens/parus.htm

² Monique Harvey (2009). L'université du troisième âge. Personal communication.

³ Université de Sherbrooke. Online: <http://www.usherbrooke.ca/uta/>.

1-3- Operation

1-3-1- General organization

The UTA website states that the University of the Third Age of the Faculty of Education at the Université de Sherbrooke is made up of 27 university sub-branches the last of which opened in Laval in early 2009.

A sub-branch is the extension of the UTA in a given region, where a seniors' student association, in conjunction with the UTA management, organizes teaching activities that are in line with student interests. These sub-branches are located in 10 regions of Quebec, namely in the Eastern Townships, Central Quebec, the region of Charlevoix, on Montréal Island, in the Laurentian Mountains and in Montérégie.

What makes the UTA unique is the contribution and participation of over 500 volunteer seniors in organizing and designing programs at all of the sub-branches. These student volunteers are the link between the senior students and the UTA's management.

1-3-2- Admission

Students are admitted as "auditors" twice a year, in the fall and winter. The format is flexible, without any prerequisites. The educational approach uses various teaching methods, such as classes, seminars, talks, workshops and activities. Some courses or activities may have limited space or be subject to conditions in effect locally, such as having a municipal sports and recreation card.

Those registered for UTA activities, who are considered to be Université de Sherbrooke students, hold a valid student card that enables participants to enjoy many advantages.

Every sub-branch is listed on the Université de Sherbrooke UTA website with a direct link to the designated regions to indicate the registration procedures, current regulations and suggested program.

1-3 -3- Education process

All lessons are taught during the day and last between two and two and a half hours per week. The total duration of a course is about 25 hours per session. Adjustments are made based on demand. The UTA management stresses that teaching activities do not necessarily take place on university premises, but may be held in public, cultural and community locations, such as museums, municipal libraries, places of worship and other locations. The goal is to make education accessible to everyone, especially in the regions.

The topics addressed vary by sub-branch and session but generally relate to history, politics, languages, literature, health, philosophy, the sciences and the environment. Everything is designed to deal with general cultural knowledge. Teaching activities involve neither assignments nor exams and are not for credit. They do, however, meet the quality and rigor standards required of all educational activities offered by the Université de Sherbrooke. Participation rates are the main indicator of interest in the format being offered.

A section inviting professors to submit proposals for courses, conferences and workshops or activities is always available on the UTA website.

1- 4- Funding

The UTA program is self-funded. Student fees, which vary depending on the activities in question, are mandatory for all students. The viability of student associations and the organization of activities depend on them. Activities are also provided thanks to the work of the student volunteers involved in the sub-branch's committees. This voluntary commitment is nevertheless rewarded with two separate awards: the order of merit and the Lieutenant-Governor's award.

2- Statistics and achievements

2-1- Statistics

In the 25 years since its inception, the UTA has noted growing demand from Quebec's various regions. The management now has 27 university sub-branches, 12,000 registrations for the current year, including 8,000 students who are taking one of the programs offered in the various regions.

Management notes that there has been a steady increase since the UTA began and thinks that these figures will continue to rise in line with the forecasts of the network of Fédérations de l'âge d'or du Québec (FADOQ)⁴, which states that baby boomers have strong potential as consumers and that 250,000 members is only the beginning.

2-2- Partnership

Founded in 1976 after the first University of the Third Age was created in Toulouse, France, the UTA in Sherbrooke has been an historical institution ever since. The website also specifies that the universities of the third age represent a global movement spread all over the world and in Quebec. The UTA at the Université de Sherbrooke is on its way to covering the entire province with its sub-branches, all of which are members of the International Association of Universities of the Third Age (IAUTA).

The UTA is overseen by a small, well-structured team that includes a main seven-person branch with five of those individuals working at the Université de Sherbrooke and the other two at the Université de Longueuil. The educators, for the most part, are retired university or college professors, or graduate students working mainly on a volunteer basis.

2-3- Achievements

The UTA has many achievements to its credit, and the expansion it has undergone in the 25 plus years since it was founded attests to an ever-growing demand. The programs being offered are increasingly diverse and developed based on demand. Guy Stringer (2001) is an assessment of 25 years of activities.

⁴ FADOQ. Online: <http://www.fadoq.ca/>

The Association des universités du troisième âge francophone d'Amérique (AUTAFA)⁵ highlighted at a conference in 2003 the societal shifts that are real challenges for the UTAs.

2-3-1- Courses, conferences, talks and other activities

Since the programs vary from region to region, this year the UTA in Granby, for example, is offering five history and current affairs courses lasting an average of 20 hours and eight workshops lasting an average of ten hours on languages; introduction to wines, cheeses and tastings; art and life. There are also five physical and aquatic activities lasting an average of ten hours. The sub-branch in the Mont-Tremblant region is offering a program of six courses lasting an average of 20 hours on history, life and death, and one science course. The program also includes different talks lasting an average of five hours on topics such as society, law, economics, travel and literature. A series of workshops lasting an average of about ten hours provide an opportunity for students to improve their knowledge of languages and technologies.

The 25 other sub-branches offer programs that are just as diverse and suited to regional needs. The management of the UTA at the Université de Sherbrooke stresses the ultimate importance of offering participants, the vast majority of whom are women, the opportunity to share and update the knowledge for which an everyday interest is essential.

2-3-2- Fonds Roger-Bernier and colloquia

The Université de Sherbrooke UTA website states that the purpose of the Fonds Roger-Bernier, created in 1987 in memory of the UTA's founder, is to support research projects on the well-being of seniors and university level activities for the development of senior-related science.

⁵ AUTAFA. Une société en mouvance...un défi pour les UTA. Online: http://www.umce.ca/autafa/congres/congres_2003/programme_final.pdf

Once a year, the UTA organizes a colloquium with lecturers from different fields all working for the well-being of seniors. In April 2009, the colloquium was on the choice to die with dignity. The schedule⁶ lists several conferences on active medical assistance, ethics, illegal compassion and the choice to live or die. This colloquium received financial support from the Fonds Roger-Bernier and the Comité de l'association de l'UTA de la Montérégie (AUTAM)-Beloeil.

Thanks to donations from UTA students, the Fonds Roger-Bernier has already made possible several innovative projects through an innovation in education contest, such as the introduction of technologies into courses, the publication of anthologies or the establishment of a database of new resource people for lessons in certain regions.

2-3-3- L'Intemporel

The Association générale des étudiants aînés à l'Université de Sherbrooke (AGÉÉAUS) has an electronic journal, L'Intemporel. Students at the Sherbrooke UTA are also invited to submit articles or news to the journal. The articles vary and may deal with associations, the rights of retirees, health issues and professional or world events.

Note: The UTA du Nord-Ouest in New Brunswick celebrated its 15th anniversary in March 2009⁷ and has no fewer than 1,200 members. The news media indicate that courses are offered on economics, computer science, nutrition, healthcare, culture, the arts or religion and are given at the Madawaska Historical Museum. Those on computers and physical fitness are given at the Université de Moncton's Edmundston Campus (UMCE). However, the UMCE website does not offer any information on this subject.

⁶ UTA, Colloque (2009). Online: <http://www.usherbrooke.ca/uta/voyage/colloque.html>

⁷ Gilles Duval (2009). L'Université du troisième âge du Nord-Ouest fête ses 15 ans. L'Acadie Nouvelle, March 7, 2009.

