

PRESIDENT'S REPORT TO EAST REGION ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Thank you all for coming along today for this Annual General Meeting, 2 October, 2018.

Some of you might wonder why we're holding it only seven months after the last one at the end of February – which is exactly the length of my presidency. It's because it was considered wise to have it a little while before the Sydney-wide AGM is held early in the New Year, so that any issues raised in our Region could be identified and hopefully dealt with beforehand - before, that is, everyone disperses for the long summer holidays.

When I was elected to the presidency, there had not been a president for about six months, the previous one having resigned suddenly the previous September. The treasurer also resigned in the same month, with an invited replacement absent overseas so often that not much was done. Fortunately, those six months were ably covered by our admirable course coordinator, Margaret Steel, and our venue coordinator Helen Penn, so that our presentations continued smoothly.

At our last AGM, however, no one volunteered to be treasurer, so I found myself covering much of that role, assisted by Helen for several months. However, after repeated advertising, Dr Marie Leech volunteered and was immediately recruited. She has had very appropriate experience, managing funds for larger bodies than ours, and is already starting to make upgrading changes in our accounting methods

More broadly, our committee has become concerned about the slow fall off in attendance at our morning meetings here. Apart from the aging of long-time members; the current attractions of overseas holiday packages; the rising number of organisations - especially libraries - offering alternative speakers and topics; and the internet, including YouTube, providing ever-increasing scholarly information, there are several practical reasons for this decline. As you well know, the present venue has very little parking available, and is poorly served by public transport. It's a steep walk up the hill from Edgecliff Station – the nearest transport node, too, and quite off-putting in hot, chilly or rainy weather.

Another practical factor is that our audio-visual equipment is simple and a bit out-of-date. Although we've been very fortunate to have the technical assistance of Gary Dobson on Monday and Tuesday mornings, the lack of it on Fridays often proved to be a problem – which is why we've moved our sessions to the Waverley Library Theatre on that day. Also, the inability to darken this hall when slide-presentations are being made was another detracting factor. In addition, more work is required by our venue assistants in setting up the room, and cleaning up etc. after our morning teas than at the Waverley Library.

For all these reasons, we've decided to hold our morning presentations at Waverley Library's Theatre in the first semester of 2019, on Mondays and Fridays. As there is a lot of competition from other groups on Tuesdays, we won't be hosting presentations on that day next year. Instead, we've arranged to have speakers on six Thursdays at Woollahra Library during semester 1. Also, we'll be having a presentation at nearby Goodwin Village on the first Wednesday each month.

We are also seeking to increase publicity about our meetings and courses in various ways, including leaving pamphlets at libraries, retirement villages, and other appropriate venues. We're also contacting the local radio stations 2RPH, 2RDJ and other community radio stations to see if they're prepared to interview our more interesting or prominent speakers, or at least announce a particularly appealing series of talks. Similarly, we are exploring opportunities to advertise and/or get mentions in the *Wentworth* and *Southern Courier* about our presentations.

Meanwhile, I've also been actively upgrading our East Region website within the overall Sydney U3A website, with the kind help of Ian Keith, an IT expert from the Greater Western region. As a first step we've placed a monthly calendar on the first page of our website, which gives us the chance to advise of any changes in speakers ahead of time, as well as to prompt members who've mislaid their course book or forgotten to check it out.

Of course, as most of our speakers are retired folk, there are inevitably going to be sudden medical problems obliging us to either cancel a presentation, or find an alternative speaker, at very short notice. This has been a very real challenge for our Course Coordinator, Margaret Steel, who has risen to it magnificently over the past years – of which, more anon. As we've found that a lot our attendees come from other regions, and travel substantial distances to get here, I've done my best to have bulk emails about changes sent out to all Sydney region groups, to avoid disappointment and annoyance. Fortunately, head office has accepted the need for such emails as a common courtesy for all.

There's quite a lot more that can be done to upgrade our website, when I compare it with some of those of other regions. (Bateman's Bay region has a remarkably good one.) But to achieve these newsy, colourful and well-presented websites that foster a sense of community requires a lot of time and effort by skilled and dedicated members. For this reason, we are particularly calling for volunteers to take on the multi-faceted tasks of publicity. It doesn't have to be just a single person – a small, cooperative team is desirable, with at least one having good IT skills.

This brings me to another point. Given that more, older, retired folk are learning and using iPhones and iPads to communicate via the social media, we are relying increasingly on email and website communication. In any case, we simply don't have sufficient volunteers to prepare and post hard-copy letters to those members who don't have email accounts and computers. Also, Australia Post is increasingly expensive, unreliable or dilatory.

An associated matter is the conversion, from hard copy to a digitised version, of the forms which new course leaders and individual presenters need to fill in. These forms are now in Word, can be easily typed in and emailed back – saving the Course Coordinator from having to decipher hand-writing and convert them to a digitised form which can be used by various committee members and venue assistants, particularly those having to introduce speakers.

Meanwhile, East Region has other, regular courses – in several languages, film discussion, current affairs, and book studies – thirteen groups in all. They are led by dedicated and selfless members who give a lot of their personal time to prepare for, and run them. Although I've not yet met many of them, I would like to take this opportunity to thank them

most sincerely for their generosity, skills and reliability – an invaluable contribution to the East Region.

But most of all I should like to thank our long-servicing Course Coordinator, Margaret Steel, whom all of you know has made such a wonderful contribution to the formation and scope of the morning presentations over several years. She has an unrivalled knowledge not only of the various interest groups among our regional membership but also of appropriate, interesting speakers. Not only that, she appreciates the need to have discussion groups from time to time, as a means of increasing and diversifying the range of topics and types of meetings. This helps meet the desire of some members to have lively debates and express their opinions. Margaret also actively encourages social interaction, not only during our coffee break, but by having occasional lunches, paid for from the entry donations.

However, Margaret's biggest task – and challenge – is to prepare the entries for our section of the Course Book for each semester. Not only does this depend on finding numerous suitable speakers and topics, vetting them for possible conflicts of interest and suitability, but also negotiating mutually agreeable dates and allocating a venue. The essence of each talk and the background of the speaker needs to be entered too – which is why it is so important those forms I mentioned above are completed fully. There are very long lead-times involved, so that Margaret is already completing the course Book entries for semester 1 of 2019.

Margaret has been very ably supported by Leslie McCawley who has been assistant course coordinator for much of this year, which we have all appreciated greatly. We had hoped Leslie may be able to succeed Margaret, but she has advised that other commitments, including a university course, would preclude that.

Margaret, meanwhile, has advised she will retire from her role in June next year, so we really need a volunteer replacement to come forward now. This is because, given that lead-time, a successor needs to start selecting speakers and times for semester 2 next year, so as to submit Course Book entries in April. Although Margaret already has some lined-up, she will not be here in Semester 2 to introduce them or follow through. Although we've been keenly looking out for a possible successor, those we've identified have declined to volunteer, so we really do hope someone will come forward - if not today, then very soon.

I'd like to conclude by thanking not only Margaret for her unstinting, dedicated work but all the volunteers – particularly our new Secretary Sandra See, our new Treasurer Marie Leech, our stalwart venue leader Helen Penn and all our venue assistants - for all the good work they have done this year to make our meetings a pleasant and smooth-running experience. Our aim is to provide good opportunities for mental stimulation, sharing of knowledge, and social interaction. I hope all members will help to contribute to, and find reward in that, into the future.