

The U3A Site Builder: Sixty-plus and Counting

A landmark was reached early in May 2009: the fiftieth U3A site "went public" on u3asites.org.uk. By August 2009 twelve more sites had been added, with another ten unpublished sites under active construction.

For those who don't know about it, the U3A Site Builder is a collection of scripts for creating and maintaining U3A web sites. It is free to use, and requires no special software or expertise, just the ability to enter information onto forms in a web browser. It produces sites with a standard layout and navigation, but there is scope for individuality by the choice of pictures, colours, and, of course, actual content. Some useful features of the system are:

- pages for individual study groups,
- dated notices and event-lists - these are no longer shown on the public site once the relevant date has passed,
- a web-based form for e-mail contacts - no need to publish visible e-mail addresses,
- a password-protected space for uploaded documents (e.g. newsletters) which only members of the relevant U3A should see,
- a "visit count" for each page, showing how many times each has been loaded.

The Site Builder was developed over three years, and gradually improved based on numerous suggestions - first from members of the original ICT Advisory Group and later from individual site authors. It has been an interesting and worthwhile experience communicating with U3A members all over the country, and seeing, via their sites, the wide range of activities undertaken within their groups.

It is one thing to make a web site, another to maintain it over a period of time. The Site Builder was designed to make it easy to keep sites up-to-date, and to share the work involved between two or more members. So it was good to see recently that 30 of the published sites had been updated in some way within the previous week, and another 20 within the previous two months.

All the information to be shown on the sites is stored in a database, and the pages are created dynamically whenever visitors ask to see them. At the time of writing the database holds content for about 1600 pages, details of 400 future events, and the names of 1900 study groups. It provides a "snapshot" of what happens in a random sample of U3As: potentially useful for further investigation if anyone wished to pursue it. For instance, although nomenclatures vary enormously from one site to the next, it is possible to see some broad trends fairly quickly. In round numbers, following are some of the most popular groups:

Book / reading - including play and poetry reading (140), *History* - including family history and local history (120), *Art / painting* - both appreciation and practical (90), *Music* - both appreciation and practical (90), *Walking* - including ambling and rambling (90). No doubt these are fairly predictable - perhaps more interesting are the one-off examples like *Aeromodelling*, *Aqua-aerobics*, *Aviation*, *Bellringing*, *Biblical Hebrew*, *Botanical Illustration* ... all the way through the alphabet to *Victorian Heroines*, *Well Dressing* and *Woodturning*.

The Site Builder was originally developed as an initiative within ICTAG: the U3A's ICT Advisory Group which was later disbanded. Since then it has been maintained as a voluntary effort; some information about it appears in the members' section of the Third Age Trust web site, but in every other respect it is completely independent. It clearly satisfies a need, and there is plenty of room for another 60, or 160, U3As to make use of it. So perhaps it is time to ask for a little more support at national level.

1. The system maintains a list of current U3As, from which members creating a new site can select. As new U3As are registered with the national office, it would be useful to receive notification so that the list can be kept up to date. At present new U3As sometimes have to request inclusion in the list before they can begin.
2. The [u3asites](http://u3asites.org.uk) domain name and hosting costs about £50 per annum, which has in the last two years been covered by private donations. Obtaining small contributions from individual U3As using the site has been considered, but deemed impractical. In view of the modest sums involved, perhaps the national organisation could undertake responsibility for the annual fee, thus ensuring the long-term viability of a useful resource?

To find out more about the Site Builder, visit <http://u3asites.org.uk>, or mail smfdege@gmail.com.

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