

Setting up Interest Groups in Dunelm U3A

Interest groups are the life blood of U3As. There are as many ways of approaching the establishment and running of the groups as there are people to run them.

Groups' Co-ordinator – the committee member responsible for facilitating the initiation of new interest groups and supporting existing interest groups. If there is no Groups' Co-ordinator, the committee contact is the Secretary.

Group Convenors – the members who are the link with the Groups' Co-ordinator and will take a leading role in co-ordinating the interest groups.

STARTING AN INTEREST GROUP

Anyone wishing to start an interest group should notify the Groups' Co-ordinator. A notice can then be circulated via all available communication channels e.g. newsletter, website, and an announcement made at a monthly/general meeting, asking those interested in such an interest group to sign their names on a list and agree to meet together at a certain place and time. Members at that meeting will then discuss informally the framework of the group.

It has been found that interest groups get off to a better start if emphasis is placed upon the group members sharing the responsibilities of running the group rather than asking one person to take on everything. It can be difficult to find a person willing to take on all the responsibility but if, at this first informal meeting, people are asked to volunteer to take on aspects of running the group, no matter how small, the group is more likely to get off the ground.

The notion that an 'expert' will deliver a 'course' is discouraged. U3A is a co-operative and mutually supportive organisation, not a service provider. Naturally an 'expert' is a huge asset but the ethos of co-operation should still be foremost. The Groups' Co-ordinator may well play a vital role here, helping to seek out suitable people to co-ordinate the group.

At the first meeting, the group members might find the following topics useful to progress things:

Setting Goals

You might like to consider the following:

- *What would we like to do?*
 - Include the range, content and nature of the subject or activity to be participated in, the time scale etc.

- *How can we achieve this?*
 - What common knowledge or skills do we have already?
 - What resources can people contribute?
 - How will we organise the group?
 - Who will do what?

- *What study/learning methods can we use?*
 - Books, DVDs, PowerPoint presentations, online material, online courses etc.
 - Volunteer experts who can be invited to demonstrate skills or give occasional talks.
 - Demonstrations
 - Trips/events etc.

Remember people may not concentrate fully on a topic for more than about 30 minutes if the same method of delivery is used e.g. an unsupported talk or lecture. It helps to build in changes in delivery and learning/study techniques.

- *Where and how often shall we meet?*
 - Rooms in community centres typically cost between £15 and £25 for two hours, if you are starting with a few people consider a coffee shop or members' homes. The location could be moved on a rota basis or it might be more convenient to meet at a central point.

- *Communication*
 - The Beacon membership management system contains members contact details and is also used for managing interest group membership and for internal e-mail communication. E-mail is a useful way to get a message around the group quickly. In compliance with Data Protection Regulations, members' details may only be used for Interest Group communications.
- *Budget*
 - Estimate your start up and running costs. Then, based on estimated attendance and contingencies, how much you need to charge members. Consult the Groups' Co-ordinator if you need any equipment etc. remember any assets purchased or donated become the property of Dunelm U3A.

Once all of these and any other matters have been decided, inform the Groups' Co-ordinator or committee member responsible, so that all U3A members know of the group's existence and the appointed person can help with advice and practical arrangements.

THE GROUP CONVENOR'S ROLE

The term Group Convenor, here, refers to all leadership models. No one person should have to carry the load of running an interest group. Ideally the group should have regular planning meetings (see below) to decide on their programme and share out the preparation tasks. As many group members as possible should participate in preparation for the sessions and the sessions themselves. If people are nervous this can be done in pairs or threes and need only be a five or ten minute contribution. It is one of the tenets of U3A that Group Convenors are drawn from the membership and that group members must also be members of U3A. The Group Convenor need not be the expert in the subject. The role of the Group Convenor is to guide a group through a course of study in which they may, or may not, lead the learning. Different subjects will make different demands on the group.

The Group Convenor should keep control of the session in respect of both timing and content. Timing is especially important if members have been asked to contribute prepared pieces. If time runs, out members may feign relief, but might actually feel disappointment that they have wasted preparation time. If this becomes a regular occurrence, members may stop preparing and sessions become disorganised.

SOME POINTERS ON RUNNING A GROUP DISCUSSION

Group discussions can be formal or informal. In an informal setting the discussion will begin, wander in all directions and then, when everyone has had enough, stop. This can work for a while but most people can find this disappointing and it can lead to discussions being dominated by a few members. In a formal discussion a chairman is appointed and is responsible for ensuring that the discussion is conducted in a fair and democratic manner.

- Allow time for socialising, some of the best discussions take place over a cup of tea.

Remember, some members will be less active than others. A member trying to take over the group needs to be dealt with but a member who never speaks may still be getting much from the discussion.

ENCOURAGE A CULTURE OF PLANNING

When planning future programmes, the following points should be considered:

Should the group continue as before?

If not, how should things change?

Has the time come to split into sub-groups?

Is a breathing space needed before starting again?