

# The Challenge of Finding Group Leaders

Interest groups are the lifeblood of the U3A movement but sometimes U3As find that not as many members are volunteering to become group leaders as is desirable for their U3A. It may be that nobody is coming forward to lead a new interest group or to start additional groups when the original ones run out of space. It could also be that members do not feel confident to take a role or that it appears to be more demanding than it actually is.

Below are some of the things you can try to encourage and inspire members to start groups.

## IDENTIFYING AND ENCOURAGING NEW VOLUNTEERS

- Find out what new members' interests are and gauge their willingness to lead groups in specific subjects from the enrolment form, at coffee mornings and at social events.
- Hold new member meetings, to familiarise them with what is available and make them feel welcome.
- Committee members can keep a look-out for people with strong interests or good people-skills. Approach these potential group leaders in person. Don't rely totally on the printed word to try to reach people. It is easy to assume that the message is not directed at them and that others will respond.
- Meet prospective new leaders to discuss the what, when and wherefore of the new group to encourage and reassure them.
- Hold an annual 'thank you' event for group leaders.
- Group leaders can identify members who may be able and willing to run a parallel group covering the same subject, possibly at a more basic level.

## GETTING HELP FROM EXISTING GROUP LEADERS

- Identify sympathetic ex-group leaders who may be happy to act as mentors to help, advise and encourage.
- Hold regular group leaders meetings and invite potential new members to attend.
- Share success stories by asking existing group leaders to talk about positive experiences of taking on the role, such as the challenges that they overcame or the confidence they gained. These talks can also help to dispel any misconceptions about what being a U3A leader means.
- Ask them to help to demystify the role and communicate that you do not need to be an expert in a particular field to lead a group successfully.
- Share out the duties with other members. A co-leader or a deputy can help in the event of absence (illness or holidays) and a facilitator can book the room, sort out the money etc, thus allowing the group leader to concentrate on his/her main function within the group.
- Encourage group members to participate and to offer to make presentations. This can help to demystify the role. It also helps to avoid a situation where a leader comes to be seen as irreplaceable, which may discourage new leaders from coming forward when he or she retires.

## TRAINING

- Prepare a U3A handbook or support pack for group leaders; this may also contain a role description and a list of general ground rules.
- Consider holding:
  - induction sessions for new leaders on successful ways to run a group within your U3A.
  - refresher workshops in single subject areas to include those potentially interested and to encourage fresh ideas in that subject/activity.
- Find out what training is planned nationally and whether anything is happening within your own network or region.
- Check out whether any relevant locally run sessions could help (Council for Voluntary Services, Local Council).

## ADDITIONAL TIPS

- Keep an updated list of suitable venues to help facilitate group organisation.

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- Advertise new groups on the notice board, in the newsletter and on the website but also in the local press. This sends the message that the U3A is vibrant and that there is plenty of scope for new members to get involved.
- Help fledgling interest groups to recruit more members by offering the group leader the opportunity in a monthly meeting to promote what they do.
- Some interest groups have a finite existence because of the nature of what they are studying. It is not a sign of failure when these close. They might also morph into something slightly different.
- Having natural break points in the year for interest groups helps them to refocus and may encourage a second group to start.
- Ensure that all your interest group leaders feel cherished and valued. Ensure they have a spokesperson on the committee (e.g. Groups' Co-ordinator).
- Introduce one-off topics, short course taster sessions or try time-limited courses of 6-8 sessions.
- Continually feed in new study topics – if members are interested enough they will be taken up.
- Have a suggestion box at monthly meetings for possible new groups and publicise the findings
- Do not delay trying to start up an interest group because you have no leader. Encourage like-minded people to get together and get started.
- Try the following suggestion at monthly meetings:
  - Set out 5 sheets of paper with a study group topic on each – these can be either completely new or ones which are already full up. Be as creative as you like.
  - Invite all members who are interested to sign up.
  - Keep putting those pages out at general meetings until six people have signed up.
  - Once you have achieved that, ask those people to stay after the meeting and start planning.
  - Leave them to decide how to tackle the topic and organise their first meeting.

### OTHER SOURCES OF HELP

#### Internal

- Resource Centre.
- Other group leaders
- Neighbouring U3As.
- Networks/regions.
- National subject advisers – see their entries on the national website.
- National website – [www.u3a.org.uk](http://www.u3a.org.uk).
- More Time to Learn, available via the online shop or by contacting the National Office.
- Sources.

#### External

- Internet.
- Open University's OpenLearn ([www.openlearn.open.ac.uk](http://www.openlearn.open.ac.uk)).
- MOOCs e.g. FutureLearn.
- Libraries.
- Online courses offered by u3aonline in Australia ([www.u3aonline.org.au](http://www.u3aonline.org.au)).
- TED talks.