

Communications

The continued success of the U3A movement as a whole depends on good communications, as does the health and well-being of every U3A. As the number of U3As grows and the number of individual members in those U3As increases, maintaining good communications throughout the U3A movement is challenging but vital.

Good communication leads to a strong sense of community, interactivity, understanding and mutual respect. It is not merely about providing information; communication is all about making members aware that they are part of a national U3A movement so that they are motivated to contribute to it.

THE MAIN CHALLENGES

- Getting all the information you receive from your network, region, regional trustee and the National Office to the right people – every U3A member.
- Having a variety of ways and means for members to find out about both daily and future activities going on in your U3A, network, region and nationally. Announcing news at a general meeting is not enough when a high proportion of members do not attend regularly.
- Keeping your members informed about what their elected committee is doing in order to avoid a “them and us” scenario.
- Encouraging a culture of sharing and participation, teaching and learning.
- Providing a platform/forum for members to make their views known both about your U3A and the national U3A movement.
- Ensuring your committee works together and shares information so you can be as well informed as possible and can function at the highest level.

WARNING SIGNS

- Conflict and dissent within the committee.
- Information not being shared between committee members resulting in administrative tasks being completed late or not at all.
- Lack of connection between the committee and membership.
- A lack of volunteers for committee posts and group convenors.
- A decreasing or static membership.
- A lack of togetherness amongst the membership with cliques forming.
- Interest groups doing their own thing without recourse to the committee e.g. allowing non-members to regularly attend their groups.
- Members interested solely in their own interest groups and completely apathetic towards their U3A as a whole, illustrated by the lack of volunteers.
- Inward looking members who forget they are part of a large organisation and therefore miss out on the full membership experience.
- Discontented members who feel they are not being kept informed about what is happening outside their U3A e.g. summer schools, study days, special events.

IMPROVING COMMUNICATIONS

Within the committee

- Be proactive when you receive information from the National Office. Discuss the contents at the committee meeting, inform by email and/or consider having a section of your website for committee use. Remember you can nominate anybody to receive hard copy mailings just by informing the National Office and all mailings are available for perusal and download in the members’ area of the national website. In addition there is a Secretary’s email list you can opt into to receive extra communications.
- Share information from the regional trustee by putting it on the agenda.
- Report to the whole committee when you attend network and regional meetings on behalf of your U3A.
- Ensure all new committee members understand that they are trustees and have appropriate induction training so that they understand their responsibilities right from the start.

Within your U3A

Paper and Telephone Communications

- Have a regular newsletter with an editor, preferably on your committee. Depending on its frequency, it can be used to inform about changes in the programme, to highlight significant events and to communicate what has been going on regionally and nationally. If newsletters are produced infrequently, send out monthly one page bulletins with 'stop press' items. Use all of the means you can to make sure all your members have access to it, e.g. have copies available at your monthly meeting and post it on your website.
- Have a "committee column" in the newsletter to keep members informed of what the committee is doing and decisions made at its meetings.
- Pass on all received information to your members and let your members decide whether it is of interest. Don't act as a censor!
- Sign up to direct mailing of Third Age Matters, if you are not already a member of the scheme.
- Give new members a welcome pack.
- Produce a members' handbook.
- Organise a telephone tree (i.e. the committee phones the group convenors, who then phone their group members). This can be a useful way of communicating quickly especially in emergency situations.

Electronic Communications

- With more and more members owning laptops, tablets and computers, your U3A should have a website. Consider having a public area which will inform and inspire people to join and a separate members' area with content about the day to day workings of your U3A. Your website also needs to be kept up to date, so make sure you are not totally reliant on one webmaster to do this and make sure that members know where to send information they would like published. If you do not have a website yet, have a look at the U3A site builder – www.u3asites.org.uk.
- Produce a weekly website bulletin.
- Encourage members to explore not just your own website, but websites for other local U3As, regions, networks and the national website as well. Make members aware that they can find the national mailings and information about events at www.u3a.org.uk. Send delegates to attend network and regional meetings so that your members can exchange ideas and information, meet like-minded people from other U3As and thus develop a wider knowledge of what is going on.
- Publish the approved minutes of your committee meetings on your website.
- Email can be an effective means of communicating information quickly to those who are able to receive it, sending newsletters or getting updates to group convenors, who can then pass the information on to all group members. You can explain the advantages of email communication to members who are not online and inform them about facilities available at local libraries.

Meetings

- General meetings – make sure they are held in a place which is accessible for all e.g. non-drivers and disabled members. Ensure it has comfortable seating and if possible with kitchen facilities and a good sound system with an induction loop. Notice boards are handy, but it is easier to have your own folding boards and consider having a suggestion box. The programme should be interesting to encourage attendance with good speakers and sufficient time for notices, reports, discussion, questions and socialising. Use the opportunity to welcome new members and introduce them to others and to encourage potential new members to join by having committee members chat to them about the benefits of U3A membership. Use a 'meet and greet' system with two people assigned to look out for new members and introduce them to one or two existing members and set up a buddy system so they have somebody to go to with their queries.
- New member get-togethers with committee members and group convenors can be really welcoming and reassuring. These could be in the form of coffee mornings.
- Have regular meetings with group convenors to allow them to communicate with each other as well as catching up on current issues and future plans. It is also important to remind them how vital they are to the U3A. You could consider organising an event to thank them for their hard work, such as an annual lunch.
- Have a regular slot at monthly meetings to fill your members in on what the committee has been doing.

- Invite interested members to attend committee meetings as observers which will help avoid a “them and us” situation and possibly encourage future volunteers for the committee.

Within the community

- Put publicity materials all over your local area – supermarkets, libraries, GP waiting rooms, dental surgeries, swimming pools, community notice boards etc. The publicity literature is available free of charge via the online shop on www.u3a.org.uk or by contacting the National Office.
- Use the local press, local radio and community television and try to establish a regular contact in each.
- Have a named publicity officer on your committee.
- Take a stand at a local fair or show or organise an open day that is free to the public to showcase what you do and can offer third agers in your community. You may be eligible for a small grant from the Third Age Trust towards the cost of these activities and the National Office can provide you with free publicity materials and loan you a U3A banner.