

Keeping your U3A Vibrant

Setting up a new U3A is challenging and exciting and your founder members will have put in a lot of energy, enthusiasm and hard work to achieve it. However, as time goes by, the vibrancy and enthusiasm which were so much in evidence in the early days can lessen. Things start to feel a bit stale, founder members may no longer be active and new members may not be as aware as they should be of the ethos and self-help philosophy of the U3A movement.

YOU MAY START TO EXPERIENCE THE FOLLOWING WARNING SIGNS

- An increase in the proportion of members not renewing.
- A decrease in the number of new members.
- Difficulty finding new Committee members.
- Existing Committee members staying on for too long, sometimes in contravention of the terms of your constitution.
- Problems in the Committee: visible discontent and unrest; no longer working as a team; disconnected from the membership.
- A lack of volunteers for Group convenors, which can mean groups being too big to function well, waiting lists, and a lack of new activities on offer.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO BREATHE NEW LIFE INTO YOUR U3A?

Membership

- Have new members' meetings so that you can make sure they understand the self-help nature of U3A membership and know everything U3A has to offer. You can also use the occasion to find out more about them and identify potential Group convenors, Committee members and volunteers for other activities.
- Have a rota of 'Meeters and Greeters' to welcome members to their first meeting which will provide their first and sometimes only impression of your U3A. Introduce them to other members and to relevant Group convenors where they have shown an interest.
- Make sure everyone knows about the ethos of the U3A. Give all new members a brief summary of the Principles of the organisation (which can be downloaded from the national website or obtained from the National Office) and remind all members about the importance of these wherever possible.
- If current members are not renewing find out why.
- Consider appointing a Welfare Officer to keep in touch with members who become ill or become unable to attend for a period of time.

Committees

- Consider whether your existing rules for tenure of office allow for a regular turnover of Committee members. If not, amend your constitution.
- Take positive steps to find new Committee members with fresh ideas and discuss ways of encouraging members to step outside of their comfort zone and get involved.
- Consider rotating non-officer committee members so that they don't get stuck in the same role.
- Support new Committee members with a full induction, emphasising the ethos of the U3A movement and providing them with useful information (i.e. minutes, annual reports, accounts).
- Make sure the size of the Committee is workable, that the role of each member is clearly defined and that their workload is manageable. If the maximum committee size stated in your constitution is proving inadequate, make use of your co-options in the short term and amend your constitution in the longer term.
- Spread responsibilities where appropriate, using sub-committees and working parties and consider splitting some tasks e.g. Secretary/Minute Secretary.
- Develop a team of volunteers who can help with specific tasks and step in at busy times.
- Make the minutes available to your members either via your website or on request.
- Run the meetings efficiently with an agenda and minutes, encourage a respectful and business-like atmosphere. Refer to the Code of Conduct for Trustees (which your Committee should adopt) for guidance in the event of recurring problems.

- Plan for succession. Invite potential members to Committee meetings and think about shadowing and having interested members ‘in attendance’ on a regular basis for key officer posts.

Interest Groups

- Ensure that Group convenors know who to go to if they need help.
- If you are a large U3A consider having two Group-Coordinators to provide essential support for existing Group convenors and be pro-active in identifying new ones.
- Have regular Group convenor meetings.
- Let Group convenors know that you value them. Following a Group convenors’ meeting with an annual lunch or tea can be a good way to show that you appreciate all they do.
- Work with the Co-ordinator(s) to look at the way groups are organised. Could different people be responsible for bookings/accommodation/membership? How could pressure on Group convenors be reduced? How could access to the groups for new members be improved?
- Provide a Group Convenor Handbook or at the very least group convenor guidelines.
- Encourage the setting up of parallel groups by experienced group members. Persuade a member of an existing group to ‘mentor’ a new group until the new group can run independently.
- Encourage members to set up an interest group together and not wait for a ‘convenor’. Some members may resist at first but once they have done it, confidence grows and they enjoy the achievement. Remind them to contact the Resource Centre.
- Liaise with local U3As on the possibility of sharing groups. Each U3A involved should agree the policy and decide how the arrangement will work e.g. members will not pay a second subscription but will pay any expenses of that group, priority is always to go to the ‘home’ U3A members. If numbers increase, encourage another group to start.
- Use ‘More Time to Learn’ to consider the various methods of learning illustrated.

Internal Communication

- Make sure your Committee communicates regularly with the membership.
- Produce regular and lively newsletters – always keep the membership informed.
- Set up a website if you haven’t already done so, keep it updated and encourage your members to use it.
- Encourage your members to sign up for email communications.
- Make use of all possible means to communicate with your members.
- Keep your members informed of what is going on regionally and nationally and encourage them to visit the relevant websites.

External Communication

- Keep your local community informed of what U3A membership can offer through the local press, radio, community television, free newsletters etc.
- Follow up on the Awareness Campaign. Put publicity materials in doctors, dentists, estate agents, libraries, community centres, village halls etc. These can be obtained from the National Office.
- Organise an Open Day and invite the public to see what your U3A can offer. Grants are available from The Trust.
- Have a stall at a local fair or show to spread the word about U3A. Grants are available from The Trust.

Conclusion

If you recognise any of the warning signs indicated, you do need to start discussing your current situation in your Committee so that you are ready to act before any problems arise. That way your U3A will continue to develop and offer a great experience for both current and new members.