

## Chair's Report 2020/21

### Background and Summary

We thought that as a maximum the Covid-19 pandemic would disrupt our activities for a year – until it carried on into this year. However we managed to continue offering support to London u3as and a wide range of activities to keep members engaged and connected.

Membership of LRU3A now comprises 43 u3as, following the closure of Haringey u3a. The combined total of around 21, 330 members represents a decline of about 4,550/19% over the year (about the same as the national average). The challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic have created challenges for u3a nationally, and one of the responses to this has been a publicity and public relations initiative to increase our national profile and encourage recruitment. Each u3a region/nation was encouraged to recruit a Public Relations Advisor and in London we were fortunate to find a volunteer to take on that role for us.

We hope that you feel, despite the difficult circumstances, we have had another successful year together as a regional network. The following are some of this year's main activities and achievements.

### Objectives of the London Region of U3As (LRU3A)

Our objectives remain support for London u3a committees and educational/social activities for all members. As a regional network, our support extends to all London u3as, and together with our Regional Trustee as ex-officio member of the Executive Committee, we uphold and benefit from the work of the Trust in London and provide a voice for London u3as at regional and national levels.

### Communications

Video Conferencing: As the pandemic continued, we all realised that video-conferencing, in particular 'Zoom', was here to stay. While a few London u3as classed themselves as closed or hibernating, the majority did continue to offer activities to their members, albeit largely online. While not being able to meet face-to-face has led to some membership losses, there are clear benefits such as savings in venue hire costs and travel time, and attendance at meetings and events has escalated online.

Our Zoom Pro account with a Larger Meeting add-on (500-attendee capacity) has again been used by London u3as without their own Zoom account, particularly for online monthly meetings and AGMs. We are grateful for the subsidy from regional Trust funds to support this initiative which has enabled large numbers of u3a members to participate in regional activities. We have continued using Zoom to provide support and training to the individual London u3as and there has been considerable upskilling and innovation resulting in greater resilience in the u3a movement. The LRU3A Shared Practice Guide for Zoom and now Hybrid meetings have become national guides.

As we start to regain the freedom to meet in person again, there has recently been a requirement to learn about new technologies that enable 'hybrid' activities, blending face to face meetings with the ability for online participation and use of digital resources. Again LRU3A has been helping London's u3as to grapple with the various scenarios for hybrid meetings depending on size of meeting and availability of hardware. Ultimately, this should enable u3as to be more inclusive in the broadest sense. It could also be said that, as younger generations are more IT savvy, online events are likely to be a good recruitment tool for a much-needed younger cohort of new members to sustain the movement.

**Bulk Messaging:** We are still hopeful that Beacon for Networks will be available soon, but in the meantime, we continue to utilise Mailchimp for bulk messaging to all London u3as via their representatives to enable the efficient cascade of appropriate information, and we have been fortunate in being able to recruit a dedicated Mailchimp Advisor. We are nevertheless dependent on key contact details being kept up to date by u3a representatives informing our Mailchimp Advisor of any changes (contrary to common belief, u3a national office does not forward this information to us).

**Website:** This is our central repository of information for all members and continues to be developed and updated. In addition to hosting our Shared Practice Guides and other useful support information, the 'Sharing' page has continued to grow. We have now developed a separate web page for the Peer Support Groups (linked from the Sharing page). The Events page continues to have a link to our archive for recordings of online talks. A brief analysis of web usage this year indicates that overall use remains about the same as last year with 5,000 to 9,000 hits per month (with seasonal fluctuations).

**Network Link:** LRU3A is an active member of Network Link, a national network of about 70 geographical u3a networks of varying sizes and structures. This enables sharing and mutual support on a national basis and provides a national channel of communication with the Third Age Trust. LRU3A also contributed to 'NetFest' - a week of Network Link events in June covering a range of networking topics.

### **Delegate Meetings**

The Executive Committee have always been keen to respond to and facilitate the interests and wishes of all u3as in our network – we are not a top down organisation. The Delegate meetings provide a quarterly opportunity for representatives to get together, discuss issues, exchange ideas and provide mutual support (a problem discussed is a problem halved).

Delegate meetings this year have included sessions on

- 'Planning for Post Covid' (which included: 'Status of Your u3a'; 'Recruitment, Retention, Re-launch')
- 'External Communications, Public Relations'
- 'What will your u3a look like (in 2021/22)?/Succession planning; also Peer Support Group reports

After a high annual average of 77% representation by u3as at Delegate meetings last year (on Zoom), the average this year unfortunately dropped back to 64% of u3as, possibly due to Zoom fatigue and easing of government restrictions on personal gatherings and travel.

### **Peer Support Group Networks (PSGs)**

The PSGs are role-based mutual support networks for u3a committee and other post-holders, but are also encouraged to share their knowledge more widely via the LRU3A website and Delegate meetings. The LRU3A has encouraged the establishment of PSGs, and representatives of the Executive Committee attend meetings to provide support if required. A common issue has been the lack of peer volunteers prepared to help with coordinating meetings, planning agendas and facilitating activities.

**Treasurers:** the first to be established, currently unfortunately dormant due to a lack of Coordinator.

**IT/Webmasters:** Has continued to meet online regularly and has looked at a range of subjects including: Website Analytics, Cloud Storage, New Brand Guidelines, SiteBuilder, Mailchimp, Use of Handover Notes, Blended/Hybrid Meetings Technology, Camera Recording/ YouTube, Beacon 2, GDPR Audit, Cascading mailshots, Risk Assessments & Covid Advice on Websites.

**The Groups Coordinators:** The group meets three times per year. A small steering group plans meeting agendas and invite guest speakers. Attendance varies, with about 40% of u3as represented, but not always by a Groups Coordinator. Meetings have included breakout rooms and presentations by guest speakers and participants, with lively discussions. The many topics discussed this year have included: developing a handbook for Groups Coordinators; how Groups Coordinators organise their roles (e.g. sole operator or team work); blended/hybrid meetings – new models for u3as; risk assessments; resuming activities safely; connecting up with Group Leaders/Convenors; Open Days and recruitment.

**Communicators/ Public Relations:** Following a national workshop in Nov 2020 on the principles of good communications, this PSG was launched in Feb 2021 with a meeting focused on communicating with members (newsletter editors, website, social media). Given the new national u3a strategy prioritising publicity and recruitment, and the appointment of the London Region PR Adviser, the remit of this PSG was then broadened to external communications. The focus of recent meetings has been towards publicity / PR / local media, outreach and social media, with an excellent workshop on Facebook Pages presented by Nicky Lee, Chepstow u3a. The Group has therefore been re-branded as the Public Relations Peer Group.

### **Educational / Social Events**

**Online events:** Altogether, 30 talks with Q&A sessions were delivered online during FY 20-21 via fortnightly Zoom sessions 5-6pm on Monday afternoons. These included 23 talks from the postponed 2020 Summer School programme (which focused on ‘The Twenties’) plus a quiz and a 6-week Cryptic Crosswords course. About 1,950 attendees were new additions to our Mailchimp database, and each session was preceded by a short briefing to assist new participants. Subtitles were introduced to assist those with hearing difficulties, if required. Delivery of these online events was free of charge, thanks to subsidisation of our regional Zoom account our by London Region Trustee.

We have therefore been able to reach far more members online than we could do in person, and this has encouraged more regional participation. Attendance during the Winter/Spring months averaged 73% (dropout rate of about 30% normal for free online events). There was a 10% decline in attendance from July when government restrictions were eased – perhaps to be expected as members took holidays and began to meet up in person. Nevertheless, a number of attendees who are unable/unwilling to attend in-person events have said how much they appreciate the online events and have requested that they continue.

**‘Getting Back into the Swing’:** To boost morale and confidence, it was decided to hold a one-day in-person Summer School on 17<sup>th</sup> August. Because of Covid restrictions we conducted rigorous risk assessments, and the event was limited to a maximum capacity of 140 to allow for social distancing. We reversed the ratio of indoor/outdoor sessions with 4 indoor sessions and 6 guided walks from the 2020 Summer School programme. We hired only 2 rooms (one for talks and one for lunches) so there was a saving on venue hire and we were able to reduce the ticket price to £33. Serving packed lunches was popular (more hygienic and a faster service) and, thanks to VAT exemption, was no more expensive than an open buffet. Tickets sold out very quickly, and for the first time, the number of new attendees equalled the number of regulars.

### **Research and Shared Learning Projects (SLPs)**

The Guardian Foundation: ‘Transcription of the Clyde Sanger Shorthand Notebooks’ – project completed successfully and available on their website.

Kingston University: Cary Ellison Theatre Programme Collection – a good number of volunteers submitted research on their local theatres past and present; presentation on university archives website.

'The State of the High Street': a 2-year national u3a research project starting with street surveys in Sept 2020 by over 500 volunteers throughout the UK (London Region leading with over 100). Baseline data was gathered on about 20,000 premises. Because of the project's London origins, LRU3A has continued to participate in the Steering Group and provide administrative support such as data analysis and helping volunteers to input their findings (including photos) into a pictorial database using iBase software. The project has been challenging on a number of fronts, but has contributed significantly to digital upskilling of u3a members nationally. Volunteers were requested to revisit their premises in Sept 2021 and update their findings (and photos) to note any significant changes such as closures or opening of new businesses. In addition, the project has spawned a variety of Shared Learning Projects -- local, regional and national. The report and database will be launched for u3a's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Requests from external researchers for u3a participants declined due to Covid restrictions but there were a few requests to participate in online projects e.g. Imperial College research on 'design solutions in the digital space for people transitioning from full-time work into full/semi-retirement'; UCL's studies on 'how listening abilities change during healthy aging'; and 'older adults' views and experiences of using herbal medicines and dietary supplements to promote health in later life'; and University of Westminster's evaluation of Chelsea Physic Garden's video tour, to inform the production of engaging/inclusive online tours for all to access and enjoy our cultural heritage at home.

### National Events

National Workshops: We have continued to draw on the individual presentations, workshops and tutorials developed and delivered nationally to support u3a committees and post holders, and freely available from the u3a office. Topics have included

- 'Beacon for Networks'
- 'Eventbrite': the event booking system, particularly helpful when organising online events requiring Zoom links
- 'Alternative Ways of Running Meetings'

### Succession Planning

LRU3A has had another very active and in many ways a positive year, and we would like to thank all of our colleagues for their contributions to the Executive Committee, Peer Group Networks and Sub-committees. Many thanks also to all the u3a representatives who have attended meetings and workshops and contributed to the lively discussions.

How we all contribute will determine our continuing sustainability. You will have noticed that we have a number of vacancies. We need more volunteers to help with a variety of tasks to support our constitutional obligations, aims and objectives – ultimately, to support London u3as. We need representatives from a good geographical spread of u3as across our region -- if you have some spare time, join us!

With best wishes for the coming year

Jenny Wilson, Vice Chair (South of Thames) and  
Derek Harwood, Vice Chair (North of Thames)  
October 2021