

u3a	The Third Age Trust Knowledge Management System	
Doc Interest Groups Matter – u3a-KMS-DOC-023		18/11/2021

INTEREST GROUPS MATTER

Category -Interest Groups

1 Purpose

Interest groups are the life blood of u3as. This guidance outlines some of the considerations related to the establishment and running of groups.

2. Scope

Relevant to all u3as.

3. Terminology

The following terms will be used:

- Group Coordinator – the member responsible for facilitating the initiation of new interest groups and supporting existing interest groups. Most Group Coordinators are committee members.
- Group Leader/Convenor – the interest group member responsible for leading the group and who links with the Group Coordinator.

4. The Group Coordinator role and responsibilities

The Group Coordinator plays an invaluable role in advising and helping new interest groups to set up and is usually a Trustee.

Responsibilities:

- Organising the timetable of interest groups to allow for maximum participation
- Ensuring groups are accessible to all members
- Conveying the importance of accessibility to Group Leaders/Convenors
- Encouraging the development of new groups both in new subjects and additional groups for existing activities, so that popular groups can be accessed by members
- Assisting with initial stages of new groups so that Group Leaders/Convenors are clear on what they are doing/need to do
- Supporting groups that are struggling
- Helping to resolve disputes within groups
- Pooling ideas between Group Leaders/Convenors on how to run effective groups

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- Ensuring that groups maintain the focus of the participative approach to learning
- Organising Group Leaders/Convenors meetings
- Valuing Group Leaders/Convenors and presenting their views to the committee
- Liaising with the committee about the u3as interest groups
- Ensuring that Group Leaders/Convenors are aware of how they need to protect members' data and the requirements of GDPR

5. Starting an interest group

It is often said that interest groups are the life blood of the u3a and each group will develop its own structure. However, it is important that your group follows the u3a ethos of shared, participative and self-help learning. 'The teachers learn, and the learners teach.' It is recommended that group members share responsibilities for running the group. The notion that an 'expert' will deliver a 'course' should be discouraged. u3a is a co-operative and mutually supportive organisation. The result then will be not only an increase in knowledge, but a supportive and friendly atmosphere which enables everyone to participate.

Each u3a will need to decide as to the procedure that needs to be followed in order for a new interest group to be established. It is important to try not to make the process too formal as this could deter new groups from starting. However it will be important for thought to be given and support given prior to a new group starting, so as to attract as much interest as possible and ensure that the group meets insurance and other requirements. Some u3as ask members to write a brief proposal about their group which is something that the Groups Coordinator can assist them with.

Monthly meetings and newsletters can then be used to canvas interest in the potential new interest group. Potential members can agree to meet together at an agreed place and time to discuss the creation of the new group.

5.1 Useful questions to ask when setting up a new group

Early on with a new group the members may find it useful to ask questions such as:

- What would we like to do?
- How can we achieve this?
- What do we know already?
- How will we organise the group?
- Who will do what?
- What study/learning methods can we use?

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- Where and how often shall we meet?
- How will the group communicate with each other?
- Will there be any charge for attending the group and how will monies be collected?

u3a members also need to be made aware of the group's existence.

6. The first steps to forming a new group

Recommended steps to undertake:

- Agree the development of your group with the Groups Coordinator/u3a committee.
- Liaise with the Groups Coordinator/Treasurer regarding the financing of the group and how this needs to be reported – where relevant.
- Consider what interest there might be in the subject perhaps by some informal soundings.
- Consider what the aims of the group are – what are you hoping to learn/achieve/share by offering the group?
- Is there an existing **Subject Adviser** who can support with ideas for the development of the group? An alternative to Subject Advisers might be to contact neighbouring u3as to see if they have a similar subject group and then talk to the **Group Leader/Convenor** to get some first-hand knowledge. It may be that you could sit in on a group meeting.
- Generate interest by promoting your group using as many different methods as possible. This could include developing publicity in the form of a flyer, poster, promotion via existing groups, via the u3a newsletter, talking to members in groups that you attend. The more methods you use, the more successful you are likely to be.
- Would the activities benefit from having a risk assessment completed for the group? You should consider whether there are any risks that might occur as a result of the group's activities and, if you identify any, talk to the Groups Coordinator who will advise you on risk assessment procedures. If you're unsure or want further advice speak with your Groups Coordinator, committee or National Office.
- Identify what you want to achieve from your first meeting.
- Organise an initial meeting and invite people to attend.

6.1 The first meeting

Recommended steps to take at the first meeting:

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- Introduce yourself and the purpose of the group as you see it.
- Ask about the skills within the group.
- Agree the tasks that need doing to run the group and who is willing to support these – **who is willing to help with the programme or keep the register, for example?**
- Agree, if relevant, the level that the group will be aimed at – beginners, improvers, advanced.
- Agree how the group will work – discussion, instruction, presentation etc.
- Agree when and where the group will run.
- Identify any accessibility needs that group members may have.
- Agree the costs for running the group and what members will pay. If it is to be funded by your committee agree a budget with them.
- Discuss how group members will communicate with each other bearing in mind data protection concerns.
- Agree some ground rules e.g.
 - Be punctual
 - Listen to each other
 - Allow others to speak
 - Let someone know if you are unable to come
 - Agree to disagree amicably and be respectful to other group members
 - Every contribution matters
 - Have patience with and encourage those who are slower to learn

Feedback what was agreed at the first meeting to your Groups Coordinator to finalise arrangements.

6.2 Participative learning and learning styles

‘Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.’ Benjamin Franklin

‘Every accomplishment starts with the decision to try’. Anon

The value of the u3a style of learning is that everyone can contribute and by doing so will gain a feeling of self-worth and integration. We all learn in different ways. Variation in content, method and style can make the learning experience more vibrant and appealing.

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Many of us will have particular skills but most of us will use a combination of the following:

- **Visual** - using pictures, diagrams, images and spatial understanding.
- **Verbal** - using words – both spoken and written.
- **Auditory** - using sounds, rhythm, music, spoken presentations.
- **Physical/kinaesthetic** - using hands, body, senses and acting things out.
- **Logical/Mathematical** - using logic, systems, sequences, data, statistics.
- **Social** - learning as part of a group, sharing experiences and explaining your understanding to others.
- **Solitary** - studying on your own.
- Consider the following options:
- **A visiting speaker** - A one-off visiting paid speaker, non-paid tutor or someone from another interest group or u3a.
- **Group member presentations** - A short presentation by a member of the group or a member leading the meeting on a specific topic.
- **Discussion groups** - Some activities will lead to discussion e.g. 'What the papers say', 'Which way does water go down the plug hole – and why?'
- **Project based** - A project chosen by the members. Each person (or pair) allocated an area of research which they bring to the group. This can be a good way to learn new technology.
- **Practical work** - This might lean towards specific subjects such as science, craft, photography, creative writing, story-telling.
- **Drama** - Create a short sketch. Provide some entertainment for your monthly meeting.
- **Themes** - Have an event or presentation linked to a specific topic.
- **Liaise with a school or community group** - E.g. local history presentation, art exhibition, debate.
- **Liaise with other organisations** - Museums, universities, libraries. Very useful for Shared Learning Projects.
- **Shared Learning Projects** - These are opportunities to work on short term projects with other u3as or outside organisations. They usually involve research and have a definite outcome.
- **Study days and workshops** - Plan one for your own members or as part of a local network. E.g. Family History Day, Language day, Story-telling workshop, debate, quiz, music.
- **Online learning** - MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses), YouTube 'How to' videos, Future Learn.

6.3 Promoting interest groups

The u3a will need to consider how best to promote its groups and activities. It needs to be done in such a way that it is easy for group members to access. Most u3as have a calendar listing meetings and activities available on their websites, for u3as using Beacon or another membership system, notifications can be sent via the database otherwise members are informed through the u3a Newsletter.

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7. The Group Leader/Convenor's role

Ideally, no one person would have to carry the load of running an interest group. Interest groups can benefit from regular planning meetings, to decide on their programme. Such meetings have been found to help maintain a lively, dynamic interest group.

The Group Leader/Convenor will guide and keep control of the session's timing and content. Timing is especially important if members are presenting prepared pieces to a session. When things are too rushed, they are likely to be unsatisfying.

Group discussions can be formal or informal. The extent and type of discussion depends on the subject and the size of the group. Some groups are almost wholly discussions in which case the facilitator will try to get everybody contributing and ensure that the discussion is conducted in a fair and democratic manner. It can be advantageous to break the group into small groups and then feedback to a general discussion. It is important to encourage participation as some members will be less active than others.

If the proposed activity is likely to be hazardous, or requires specialist instruction, the Groups Coordinator should contact National Office to check regarding insurance cover.

Group Leaders/Convenors will need to discuss with the group as to how group members will communicate with each other. This needs to take into account the requirements of GDPR. The Group Leader/Convenor may also need to consider as to whether emergency contact details are required for members and how these will be obtained. Some u3as ask members to carry an ICE (in case of emergency) card or the u3a can complete a legitimate interest assessment and request emergency contact details on that basis.

8. Problem solving

Sometimes issues can arise within a group that disrupt the smooth running and spoil the enjoyment for everyone. Don't leave a problem too long before trying to resolve it. Talk to your Groups Coordinator or committee if you are unsure how to resolve the problem or just want someone to explore options with. You can also ring National Office if you want to talk something through or check something out.

9. Accidents and incidents

9.1 Handling problems within groups – accidents

Report all accidents and incidents to your committee as soon as possible and complete an accident form. A template form is available. It is good practice to have an accurate record in case of future problems relating to the incident. Remember that the Third Age Trust provides insurance for groups activities. For some groups you may consider it necessary to ask members to hold or provide emergency contact details.

- Report all accidents and incidents to your committee as soon as possible. In the case of an accident which results in injury or damage to property, complete an

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accident form (ask the Group Coordinator for copies or download from the website: or in the absence of the form send a detailed report to the committee, including details of witnesses.

- Call for medical advice, if required.
- Remember personal accident insurance cover is not provided by the Third Age Trust. Insurance cover is 'third party' but third parties do include other u3a members.
- If damage is caused to property by a member of the group, take full details, as it may be the subject of an insurance claim.

9.2 Handling problems within groups – member participation

Where there is potential for friction it is advisable to begin by bringing it into the open. Either you or another person could try to facilitate a discussion either with the members concerned or with the whole group, but it is important that the facilitator remains neutral and non-judgemental. If you cannot reach a resolution informally speak to your Group Coordinator or a member your committee. If a situation does not resolve and becomes acrimonious your committee can consult the advice on disciplinary procedure provided by the Trust: There are also Trust Volunteers trained to support with resolving disputes.

- If a member's behaviour is regularly disturbing other members of the group consult the Group Coordinator for help. If the Group Leader/Convenor feels comfortable dealing with the issue in the first instance, then s/he should do so but if not or additional support is needed then the Group Leader/Convenor should speak with the Groups Coordinator to get support.
- If there is a very serious problem in a session, it may be necessary to ask a member to leave for the remainder of the session but contact the Group Coordinator as soon as possible after the end of the session.
- If a member who is not able to cope independently comes to a meeting without a 'carer', inform the Group Coordinator as soon as possible.

10. Interest group organisation – practical considerations

Make sure sufficient information is given to group members so they can make an informed choice as to whether they wish to participate. This is particularly important in relation to accessibility issues as groups need to make 'reasonable adjustments' in line with equalities legislation to ensure that members can participate. It is also important where the group involves physical activity.

Group Leaders/Convenors must not make the decision to exclude members from a particular activity except in very special circumstances such as cases where the risk of harming others is unacceptable.

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- Remind members that any group involving physical activity is undertaken at their own risk. You may want to consider asking members to complete a waiver form.
- Leaders of walks should make sure that they have considered all risks, carried out a risk assessment and completed a walk leader checklist
- Consider whether a group could need licences to cover photocopying, recorded music, DVDs, videos and performance.
- If written material is provided and uses the u3a logo make sure it is correctly displayed. See the section on use of the u3a Trademark
- All Group Leaders/Convenors should delegate where possible to spread the workload.
- If a Group Leader/Convenor feels that a group would benefit from having a particular item of equipment consult the Group Coordinator in the first instance.

Finally, remember that once a group is set up with the prior approval of the committee, it is fully protected by the liability insurance policy provided by the Third Age Trust, provided the rules are followed, nothing illegal is done and excessive risks are not taken.

10.1 Policies and procedures

Your committee and/or Groups Coordinator will advise you of the u3a insurance arrangements as well as policies and procedures that you need to be aware of. These will include matters concerning:

- Finance
- Data Protection
- Safeguarding
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
- Accessibility
- Complaints
- Incident reporting **It is also a good idea to sign up to the National Newsletter that is sent out by the Third Age Trust every month, via this website, as this will keep you up to date with wider u3a news.**

Note the references to all these documents can be found under Related Documents.

10.2 Copyright

The Trust holds a licence to copy some materials for educational use within groups. **If you are going to be using copyright material in any form, for example, printed, audio or pictures**, please refer to Copyright policy.

11. Help and support

Other learning opportunities

- Shared Learning Projects and Shared Learning Project Coordinators – contact details available from the [National Website](#)
- [National and Regional Summer Schools](#)
- [Events](#) facilitated by National Office
- National, Regional and Network [Workshops and study days](#)
- Outreach departments of universities

11.2 Sharing information

It can be good to share information about your group which can be done in a number of ways:

- On the u3a website
- By setting up a Facebook group or page
- Via social media
- In the u3a newsletter
- Via Sources or Sources Online
- At regional, network or local events

11.3 Resources

- **Educational Resources** - National Office offers access to a range of educational resources. These can be booked here <https://www.u3a.org.uk/resources>. For DVD and CD loans, the only cost is return postage.
- **Sources and [Sources Online](#)** - are the u3a educational insert and online platform that provide ideas to enhance learning.
- **Subject Advisers** - Trust volunteers with specialist knowledge in a wide range of topics. Contact details on the [National Office](#) and in Third Age Matters.
- **External organisations** - Museums, libraries, schools, universities.
- **u3a publications** - Check the national website for the latest publications.
- **Networks, regions, neighbouring u3as** - allow you to draw on experience from within the movement.
- **Regional Trustee** - will provide an overview of the region and a link to National Office.
- **National Office** - The staff team are available Monday to Friday to offer support.

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Related documentation

u3a-KMS-DOC-003 Shared Learning Projects
 u3a-KMS-DOC-009 Copyright
 u3a-KMS-DOC-011 Electrical Inspection and Testing
 u3a-KMS-DOC-021 Insurance FAQs
 u3a-KMS-DOC-033 Financial Matters
 u3a-KMS-DOC-034 Group Leaders/Convenors Handbook
 u3a-KMS-DOC-037 Complaints Procedure Sample
 u3a-KMS-DOC-038 Disciplinary Procedure Sample
 u3a-KMS-DOC-039 Grievance Procedure Sample
 u3a-KMS-DOC-053 Data Protection
 u3a-KMS-FRM-001 Incident report form template
 u3a-KMS-FRM-002 Risk assessment templates
 u3a-KMS-FRM-003 u3a Health check
 u3a-KMS-POL-001 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policy Sample
 u3a-KMS-POL-005 Safeguarding Policy and Procedure Sample
 u3a-KMS-POL-007 Accessibility Policy Sample (England, Scotland and Wales)