

Interest Groups

Interest groups are the life blood of U3As. There are as many ways of approaching the establishment and running of the groups as there are people to run them. This document summarises the experiences and practice of many U3As and is passed on in the hope that it may be useful.

For the purposes of this leaflet the following terms will be used:

Groups' Co-ordinator – the committee member responsible for facilitating the initiation of new interest groups and supporting existing interest groups.

Group Convenors – the members who are the link with the Groups' Co-ordinator and will take a leading role in co-ordinating the interest groups.

THE GROUPS' CO-ORDINATOR

The groups' co-ordinator plays an essential and invaluable role in advising and helping new interest groups to set up. The usual responsibilities will be:

- Negotiating the timetabling of the interest groups to allow for maximum participation.
- Co-ordinating support for new groups or groups that may be in difficulties.
- Being the focus for pooling ideas between Group Convenors on all aspects of group co-ordination.
- Canvassing for new group convenors.
- Organising Group Convenor meetings for inter-communication, social and other purposes e.g. discussing new initiatives.
- Speaking up for and supporting Group Convenors generally and devising ways for the U3A to show its appreciation of its Group Convenors.
- Liaising with the committee on all aspects of interest groups.

STARTING AN INTEREST GROUP

Anyone wishing to start an interest group should notify the Groups' Co-ordinator. A notice can then be circulated via all available communication channels e.g. newsletter, website, bulletins and an announcement made at a monthly/general meeting, asking those interested in such an interest group to sign their names on a list and agree to meet together at a certain place and time. Members at that meeting will then discuss informally the framework of the group. It has been found that interest groups get off to a better start if emphasis is placed upon the group members sharing the responsibilities of running the group rather than asking one person to take on everything. It can be difficult to find a person willing to take on all the responsibility but if, at this first informal meeting, people are asked to volunteer to take on aspects of running the group, no matter how small, the group is more likely to get off the ground. The notion that an 'expert' will deliver a 'course' should be discouraged. U3A is a co-operative and mutually supportive organisation, not a service provider. Naturally an 'expert' is a huge asset but the ethos of co-operation should still be foremost. The Groups' Co-ordinator may well play a vital role here, helping to seek out suitable people to co-ordinate the group.

At the first meeting, the group members might find the following topics useful to progress things:

Setting Goals

You might like to consider the following:

What would we like to do?

Include the range, content and nature of the subject to be studied, the time scale etc.

How can we achieve this?

What common knowledge do we have already? What resources can people contribute? How will we organise the group? Who will do what?

What study/learning methods can we use?

Books, DVDs, PowerPoint presentations, online material, online courses etc.

Volunteer experts who can be invited to demonstrate skills or give occasional talks.

Demonstrations

Trips/events etc.

Remember people may not concentrate fully on a topic for more than about 30 minutes if the same method of delivery is used e.g. an unsupported talk or lecture. It helps to build in changes in delivery and learning/study techniques.

Where and how often shall we meet?

When discussing where to meet it might be useful to consider where people live. If they are travelling from a wide area, the location could be moved on a rota basis or it might be more convenient to meet at a central point. The important thing is to agree about the location.

Communication

A telephone tree or email is a useful way to get a message around the group quickly, so ask group members to provide contact details and ensure you keep them secure and up to date and only use them for internal communication. Once all of these and any other matters have been decided, inform the Groups' Co-ordinator or committee member responsible, so that all U3A members know of the group's existence and the appointed person can help with advice and practical arrangements.

TYPES OF STUDY

There are various types of study. Aim for a good mixture of them.

- Teamwork. A small team of group members share the delivery and facilitate the study.
- Convenor led. The convener acts as a leader to facilitate the planning of the learning activities. Once the programme has been determined, individual members take responsibility for the various elements of the programme/administration. The convenor continues to lead sessions.
- Teacher led. Here the member with the necessary expertise leads sessions. Other members take on the necessary administration.
- Resource Centre led. Enthusiastic members, keen to pursue an interest but without expertise amongst them, join together and contact the Resource Centre to supply them with the non-book materials they need.

More information can be found in *More Time to Learn*, which is available as a hard copy free of charge to U3As from the National Office and as a download from the national website.

THE GROUP CONVENOR'S ROLE

The term Group Convenor, here, refers to all leadership models. No one person should have to carry the load of running an interest group. Ideally the group should have **regular planning meetings** (see below) to decide on their programme and share out the preparation tasks. As many group members as possible should participate in preparation for the sessions and the sessions themselves. If people are nervous this can be done in pairs or threes and need only be a five or ten minute contribution. It is one of the tenets of U3A that Group Convenors are drawn from the membership and that group members must also be members of U3A. The role of the Group Convenor is to guide a group through a course of study in which they may, or may not, lead the learning. Different subjects will make different demands on the group.

The Group Convenor should keep control of the session in respect of both timing and content. Timing is especially important if members have been asked to contribute prepared pieces. If time runs out members may feign relief, but might actually feel disappointment that they have wasted preparation time. If this becomes a regular occurrence, members may stop preparing and sessions become disorganised.

SOME POINTERS ON RUNNING A GROUP DISCUSSION

Group discussions can be formal or informal. In an informal setting the discussion will begin, wander in all directions and then, when everyone has had enough, stop. This can work for a while but most people can find this disappointing and it can lead to discussions being dominated by a few members. In a formal discussion a chairman is appointed and is responsible for ensuring that the discussion is conducted in a fair and democratic manner.

Whichever style is chosen, the group should agree some ground rules, for example,

- Everyone must have a chance to speak.
- Everyone should listen.

- Everyone's opinion is valued and respected even if people differ in views.
- Everyone should keep to the point.

Some ways of starting a discussion:

- Each member makes a short contribution to the topic (30 seconds/1 minute?).
- Each member gives a one-word reaction to the topic.
- Members take it in turns to make an opening presentation (5 minutes?).
- Members offer a personal anecdote (needs to be planned).
- An artefact/article/picture etc. which illustrates the topic is introduced and an explanation is given regarding its selection.

Ways of ending:

- Try to end discussions on a productive note.
- Members can take it in turns to sum up what has been said.
- Each member to say, briefly, what they have learned/found interesting.
- Ask the group for comments on how the next discussion could be conducted based on what has been learnt from this one.

Techniques and tips:

- Break the group into pairs or small groups and then feed back to a general discussion.
- Produce artefacts, leaflets, collages, photo-montage displays, short videos etc. to summarise discussion group outcomes. (This is a long-term activity.) These can be displayed at monthly meetings, study days etc.
- Compile key-word summaries.
- Allow time for socialising, some of the best discussions take place over a cup of tea.

Remember, some members will be less active than others. A member trying to take over the group needs to be dealt with but a member who never speaks may still be getting much from the discussion.

ENCOURAGE A CULTURE OF PLANNING

Many U3As have found that regular planning sessions can contribute towards establishing a lively, dynamic interest group. The best ideas come from an open 'brainstorming' session where everything and anything relevant to the topic can be suggested. Even frivolous suggestions can trigger unusual or exciting practical suggestions that might have stayed dormant otherwise. Negative comments should not be part of the discussion until a good selection of possibilities has been identified. At this stage the practicalities can be assessed but constructive comments should be encouraged. Bald negativity tends to restrict the part of the brain that produces creative/problem solving thoughts.

When planning future programmes, the following points should be considered:

- Should the group continue as before?
- If not, how should things change?
- Has the time come to split into sub-groups?
- Is a breathing space needed before starting again?