

SOME FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE U3A

1. WHAT EXACTLY IS THE U3A?

The University of the Third Age is a world-wide network aimed at providing life-long learning and stimulating activities for retired people. It has been around for about 45 years and is particularly strong in Britain, where you will find a U3A in most large towns or districts.

2. IS IT A REAL UNIVERSITY?

It's called a university because it offers opportunities to study, to practise new activities and to experience the pleasure of learning together with others, but there are major differences between the U3A and normal universities. For a start, we don't have students; we have members. You join a local U3A just as you'd become a member of a local amateur dramatic society or tennis club. You pay an annual membership fee, which means you can go to meetings and get involved in activities or subjects that interest you. Another difference is that there are no entry qualifications to worry about, or exams to take at the end! In fact there isn't an 'end' as such; you can carry on with a subject or activity as long as it is on offer. And no one will turf you out for failing, or for not doing enough work.

3. WHAT SORT OF PEOPLE JOIN THE U3A?

The U3A is for all people who wish to keep their minds and bodies in good shape with the passing years. Your previous experiences – jobs, qualifications, achievements, etc. – are irrelevant. The U3A welcomes everyone and gives all-comers the opportunity to try out exciting new things.

4. IS THERE AN AGE LIMIT?

No. There is neither an upper nor lower age limit. You don't need to be a senior citizen, though most U3A members tend to be in that category. And you don't need to be permanently retired either. In fact, no one will delve into your background at all if you come along and ask to be a member. An important point to note, though, is that nearly all meetings are held during the daytime rather than evenings, so the U3A isn't really suitable for people who have a steady 9-5 type of job.

5. WOULD I BE JOINING A LOCAL OR A NATIONAL ORGANISATION?

A bit of both - When you pay your membership fee you are actually joining a particular local U3A, and can then take part in any of the subjects, activities and meetings run by that U3A. However, there is a national umbrella body, called the Third Age Trust, which exists to provide advice and resources that are made available to all the local U3As and all U3A members. A part of your membership fee goes to this head office.

6. HOW DO U3As DIFFER FROM EACH OTHER?

U3As are independent bodies. They organise their own programme of activities and fix their own subscription fees. In practice, however, most U3As tend to be run on fairly similar lines, each offering a set of 'interest groups' that members can join. The number of such groups varies, as does the actual subjects on offer. These reflect the interests of the local membership.

7. WHAT'S ON OFFER FROM PARBOLD, NEWBURGH & DISTRICT U3A?

Our U3A holds two “Horizons” general meetings in the “Hut-on-the-Hill”, the Scout premises on Parbold Hill, on the 2nd and 4th Tuesdays of each month at 1.30pm, usually with a visiting speaker. At present we offer around 21 special-interest groups with most group meetings being held once a month or weekly, but there are some variations. The subjects are wide ranging, including some that have a broadly educational slant (e.g. history,), some that are primarily practical (e.g. digital photography,), and some that are unashamedly social (e.g. ‘Lunch Club’). But it would be wrong to classify the groups too tightly; for instance a language course is both educational and practical, and often very sociable as well!

8. WHAT DOES IT COST?

Very little! We fix an annual subscription fee, which currently is £13.50. Above that, you pay a small fee for each meeting that you attend. We ask for £1.50 for coming to the “Horizons” meetings and also £1.00 for the individual group meetings to cover the cost of tea and biscuits. We hardly need to stress that these figures are enormously attractive compared with what you’d have to pay to go on local authority or privately-run courses. The U3A is a fantastic bargain!

9. CAN I JOIN THE U3A FOR THE “HORIZONS” MEETINGS ONLY?

Yes, a few of our members do just this. But you’ll get more out of the U3A if you join one or more groups.

10. CAN I JOIN A GROUP BUT NOT BOTHER WITH THE “HORIZONS” MEETINGS?

Yes; again some of our members do this. But as well as offering some interesting talks, the “Horizons” meetings give us an opportunity to keep members informed of developments such as new groups starting up, and to make announcements about future events. It’s also a nice social get-together with tea and biscuits included in the £1.50 fee.

11. CAN I JOIN MORE THAN ONE GROUP?

Yes, as many as you like!

12. WHERE DO THE TEACHERS COME FROM?

This is an important point. A basic principle of the U3A is that of ‘shared learning’. Nearly all the people who run groups are U3A members themselves – they volunteer to lead a group. For instance the language groups are run by U3A members who are knowledgeable in the appropriate language. But not all groups require an expert to lead them. In many cases the group leader is simply a member who volunteers to coordinate the group’s programme of meetings, and claims no more knowledge or skill than the average group member. It’s worth mentioning that joining the U3A doesn’t mean that you will be expected to be a group leader; only a small proportion of members are group leaders.

13. WHO DECIDES WHICH GROUPS ARE ON OFFER?

The members themselves. Our U3A has a committee that endeavours to ensure that our affairs run smoothly, and one of the committee members is our ‘Groups Coordinator’, with the job of providing help in setting up, finding suitable locations, and so on. But the committee doesn’t decide which groups will be offered – all groups come about as a result of members expressing an interest in a particular subject.

14. IF I JOIN A GROUP, WILL I BE EXPECTED TO DO WORK BETWEEN GROUP MEETINGS?

You will never be forced to do anything. Whether you do things between meetings depends on the type of group, and the time that you are able to give to it. For instance, if you join a foreign language group it makes sense to practise what has been covered in the group meeting. The group leader may in fact suggest some 'homework' and obviously you will learn more quickly if you find the time to do it. Other groups such as a Reading Group involve doing some private reading and bringing your opinions to a discussion at the next meeting. Still other groups may involve members being advised to do some background exploration of a subject in advance of a talk or discussion to be held later.

15. WHAT IF MEMBERS OF A GROUP HAVE WIDELY VARYING ABILITIES OR KNOWLEDGE?

It depends on the subject. In some cases this does not matter at all (those with knowledge share it with those who haven't), but in other cases this can be relevant. The Group Leader and/or Groups Coordinator can give advice on whether the group is suitable for you, given your existing knowledge. Sometimes a group can be split into two or more sub-groups according to the expertise of group members. This can apply to practical subjects as well as knowledge-based ones. For instance we've heard that one U3A (not ours) has subdivided its rambling group into separate 'ramblers' and 'amblers'!

16. WHERE ARE THE GROUP MEETINGS HELD?

Our meetings are for the most part held at the "Hut-on-the-Hill" – the Scout hut behind Christ Church on Parbold Hill. There is usually no trouble getting to meetings; members often share transport, and those without a car will nearly always be able to get a lift with another member.

17. HOW DO I JOIN A GROUP?

It's best first of all to have a word with the relevant Group Leader. She or he will explain how the group operates, such as confirming when and where the group meets, how the meetings are organised, and what the current programme of meetings involves. You should be able to assess whether the group in question seems to fit the bill for you.

Also, please do have a good look at our website – Parbold, Newburgh & District U3A – for full details.

18. WHAT IF I'M NOT SURE WHETHER A GROUP IS FOR ME?

You will be more than welcome to attend a group session once or twice as a taster, to see if it is suitable for you.

19. WHAT IF THERE ISN'T A GROUP THAT CATERS FOR MY SPECIAL INTEREST?

We are always on the look-out to start up new groups, and it's possible that your interest is shared by others. The first step is to contact the Groups Coordinator to find out if the subject or activity has already been suggested by others. Usually the next step is to put out feelers at a "Horizons" meeting, or to phone people who might be interested in joining you. If sufficient people express an interest, it's just a short step to getting the new group off the ground. The Groups Coordinator will advise on suitable times and places to hold your meetings, and there's also some start-up money available if resources are needed. Putting forward an idea for a new group doesn't necessarily mean that you will have to be the group leader; someone else may be willing to do this.

20. WHAT DOES THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION – THE THIRD AGE TRUST - HAVE TO OFFER?

Quite a lot; To start with, there's a large range of physical resources available for groups to borrow. These include DVDs, and videos. They are invaluable for subjects such as music, art history, architecture, history, religion and philosophy. Then there are human resources in the shape of national coordinators for many subjects; their advice can be sought on ways to run particular interest groups. National experts are also available at an annual summer school, where members can choose from a set of interesting short lecture or practical courses. U3A members can receive a regular magazine 'U3A News', and the excellent publication called 'Sources'. For those with internet facilities, there's a national website, which is a mine of useful information; and members can join national on-line courses in a growing list of subjects. Finally there is the U3A Travel Network, which offers dozens of special-interest holidays in the UK, Europe and world-wide – all at very reasonable prices.

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