Group Leaders/Convenors Handbook

Category: Interest Groups

Purpose

To provide advice and support to interest group leaders.

Scope

The handbook is based on common practice - please remember that each U3A is operationally independent. Specific details should be checked with your Group Coordinator and/or your committee.

The title 'group leader' is used in this guide as it is the one most commonly used by members. However, people who help to create interest groups are known by many names. You might be a group leader, facilitator, convener, manager, organiser.

Introduction to interest groups

Thank you for agreeing to organise an interest group. We are sure you will find it very rewarding, however, it might seem a bit daunting initially. This information is intended to provide advice and support with this.

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.' The result then will be not only an increase in knowledge, but a supportive and friendly atmosphere which enables everyone to participate.

U3A principles

The U3A ethos is based on three principles:

The Third Age Principle:

- Membership of a U3A is open to all in their third age.
- Members promote the values of lifelong learning and the positive attributes of belonging to a U3A.
- Members should do all they can to ensure that people wanting to join a U3A can do so.

The Self-Help Learning principle:

- Members form interest groups covering as wide a range of topics and activities as they desire.
- Learning is by the members, for the members.

- No qualifications are sought or offered. Learning is for its own sake, with enjoyment being the prime motive, not qualifications or awards.
- There is no distinction between the learners and the teachers. They are all U3A members.

The Mutual Aid principle:

- Each U3A is a mutual aid organisation, operationally independent but a member of the Third Age Trust, which requires adherence to the U3A movement.
- No payments are made to members for services to any U3A.
- Each U3A is self-funded with membership subscriptions kept as low as possible.
- Outside financial assistance should only be sought if it does not imperil the integrity of the U3A.

The first steps to forming a new group

Recommended steps to undertake:
- Agree the development of your group with the Group Coordinator/U3A Committee.
- Liaise with the Group 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 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 Group Coordinator who will advise you on risk assessment procedures. If you're unsure or want further advice speak with your Group Coordinator, Committee or National Office (refer to U3A-KMS-FRM-002, U3A-KMS-FRM-011, U3A-KMS-FRM-012 and U3A-KMS-FRM-013).
- Identify what you want to achieve from your first meeting.
- Organise an initial meeting and invite people to attend.

The first meeting

Recommended steps to take at the first meeting:
- 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.
- 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. Refer to the U3APlus website for advice and guidance: https://plus.u3a.org.uk/.
- 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 Group Coordinator to finalise arrangements.

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. 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.

Help and support

Resources

Subject Advisers: Trust volunteers with specialist knowledge in a wide range of topics. Contact details on the National Website 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.

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

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

Policies and procedures

Your Committee and/or Group 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 recommended that you also have a look at the advice section of the National Office website where a range of useful information can be found. It is also a good idea to sign up to the newsletter that is sent out by the Trust every month as this will keep you up to date with wider U3A news. You can sign up to the newsletter via the national website.

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 check with the advice section of the national website for further details on copyright (refer to U3A-KMS-DOC-009).

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 Group 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.

Issues between group members

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.

Accidents and incidents

Report all accidents and incidents to your Committee as soon as possible and complete an accident form. A template form is available on the national website. It is as well to have an accurate record in case of future problems relating to the incident. Remember that the Third Age Trust provides insurance for group activities. For some groups you may consider it necessary to ask members to hold or provide emergency contact details. To request contact details, you need to complete a legitimate interest assessment – please refer to the National Office website for a suitable template.

Log book

This section of the handbook is for you to develop in whatever way you feel would be most helpful. It could include:
- Statement of the group's aims
- Contacts
- Registers
- Venue, timing, costs
- Accounts where relevant
- Materials and support available
- Local information

Related documentation

Growth Matters U3A-KMS-DOC-014
Interest groups U3A-KMS-DOC-023
Financial Matters U3A-KMS-DOC-033

Data protection U3A-KMS-DOC-053
Venue Risk Assessment Checklist U3A-KMS-FRM-002
Venue Day of Use Checklist U3A-KMS-FRM-011
Walk Leader Risk Assessment Checklist U3A-KMS-FRM-012
Workshop Activity Risk Assessment Checklist U3A-KMS-FRM-013
Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policy Sample U3A-KMS-POL-001
Data Protection Policy Template U3A-KMS-POL-002
Accessibility Policy Sample (England, Scotland and Wales) U3A-KMS-POL-007

1 Heading 1

1.1 Heading 2

1.1.1 Heading 3

1.1.2 Heading 4

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