

U3a Guidance Paper: Working with your local university

Introduction

The purpose of this guidance paper is to (a) raise awareness among u3as of the benefits of having a partnership/relationship with your local university and (b) provide some advice about possible ways of setting up initial contact. The content is derived from a brief survey of u3as who are currently (2021) working with universities, together with discussions with a number in more detail. This initial research has highlighted the fact that there are as many different forms of relationship or partnership between u3as and universities as there are u3as. No one size fits all. However, there is a certain commonality which this paper seeks to capture and pass on to those u3as who are seeking to explore further locally.

What does the u3a gain from working with its local university?

These are just some of the potential benefits, not all of which are available in each individual case.

- Access to public lectures
- Access to learning resources/library
- Potential speakers
- The opportunity to participate in joint research
- A potential for “keeping up to date” through working with current students/researchers
- The satisfaction of knowing that, through partnership, members are helping to contribute to an increase of knowledge.

What are the benefits for the university? What strengths does the u3a have which it can offer to the university?

Universities have been required by funders for some time to provide evidence of meaningful partnerships with their local community in its broadest sense, e.g. businesses, colleges and local groups and organisations. Most universities will therefore have a department or individual officer whose responsibility it is to liaise with outside bodies and build constructive relationships involving the exchange of knowledge. The Knowledge Exchange Framework being developed by Research England (in 2021) demonstrates that this is the case.

The u3a can:

- Be a source of research participants within the demographic of its membership. Active learning and participation is to be encouraged whenever possible so that u3a members involved learn through taking part and are treated as equals in the relationship with the researcher. However, a first step toward the active learning approach may be encouraging members to partake in research as subjects as a first step when the relationship with the university/department is developing.
- Harness the skills and experience of u3a members by, for example, providing mentors for students;
- Attending research presentations in the context of a “critical friend”, providing constructive feedback.
- Provide evidence to university/research funders of potential knowledge exchange with a wider community.

What might a partnership with a university look like: A case study

Exeter u3a developed a partnership over the years with Exeter University. One of the outcomes of this was a series of lectures for u3a members. On one particular occasion, representatives of the university's Classics department talked about the Ancient Greek philosophers' differing concepts of happiness. From this grew an intergenerational shared learning/research project that compared our current thinking around happiness with that of the ancient philosophers. U3a members were taught the skills of interviewing for qualitative research and interviews were carried out by students of Classics and u3a members, interviewing each other. The data collected was analysed by u3a members as well as the students and in any published work, the u3a members involved have been cited as co-authors in every instance. They have also produced a briefing on what was involved in order to pass on lessons learnt to others.

Where to start?

1. Start with the u3a: who is going to do the work? Does it have an identifiable group of members who are interested in research? Is there someone who is enthusiastic and determined who can "push on doors"? Is there support generally amongst the members going forward?
2. Contact the university: There are four possible ways in here.
 - (a) A member has existing contacts in the university who are keen to develop a relationship with the u3a. This might be the Vice-Chancellor (one u3a works at this level), or, more likely, heads of department or research schools.
 - (b) Contact the "outreach" office. A search on a university's website involving the terms "public", "participation", "outreach", "partnership" or "engagement" should enable a u3a to identify where in the institution responsibility for this aspect lies.
 - (c) Contact researchers working with human participants. These can be found in departments such as psychology, health and social sciences.
 - (d) Some u3a members may be Alumni or students at the university. Alumni can also offer to talk to students and potential students about their experiences in said university.

Concluding thoughts

- Be prepared for the process to take some time. Academic work can be extremely demanding and, for most, the workload varies throughout the year to a certain extent.
- Once involvement of u3a members has been agreed on a specific project, there will be a waiting time whilst funding is sought/obtained if needed.
- If one approach is not successful, try another.
- Support is available from members of the u3a Research Network who are Third Age Trust volunteers.

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