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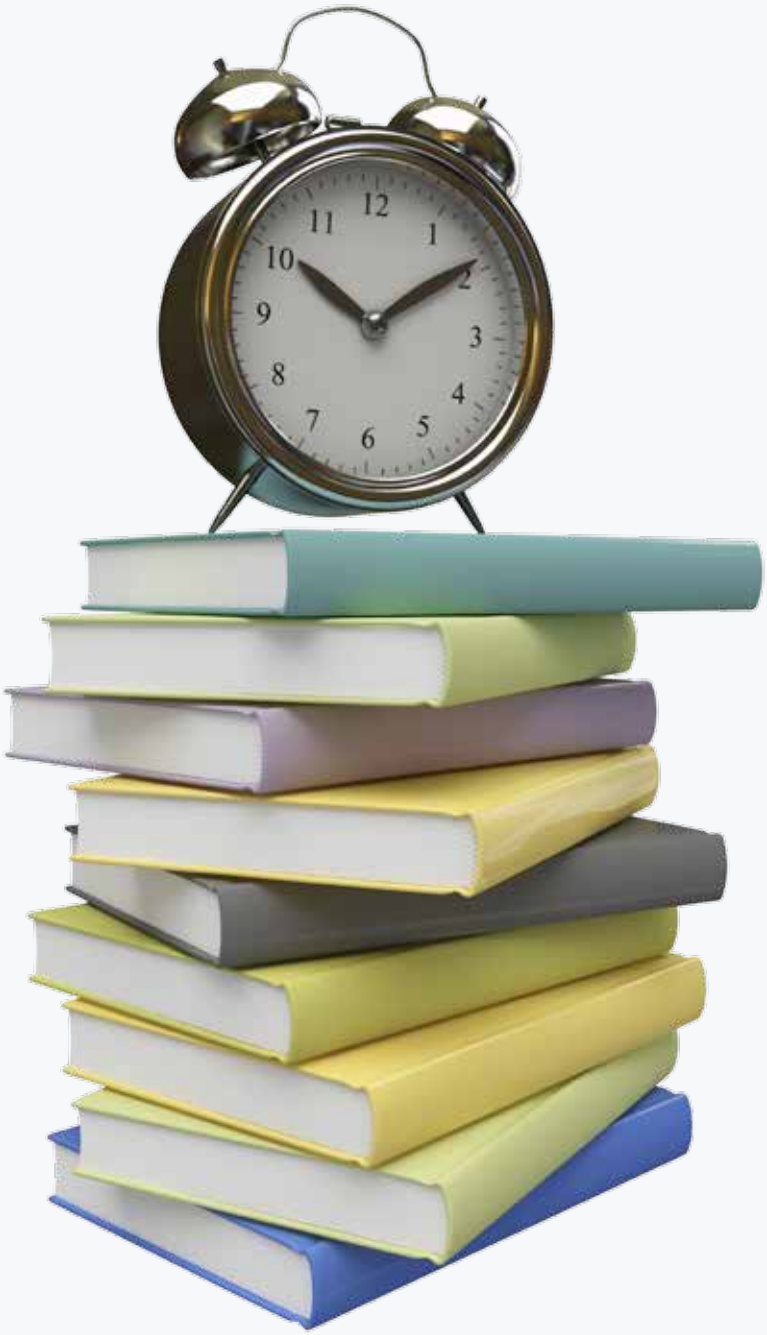

More Time to Learn

Non-formal learning in the U3As

THE THIRD AGE TRUST
U3A
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

"Those who teach shall also learn and those who learn shall also teach"

Peter Laslett, 1989

This booklet is dedicated to all those thousands of subject and activity group leaders, whose work has been fundamental to the success of the U3A movement, and to those active members upon whom the growth and continued success of the U3A movement in the UK depends.

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Preface

Dr Eric Midwinter, in our inaugural Founder's Lecture in 2013, said:

> *"The key is enjoyment. I very genuinely believe that no true education occurs without enjoyment, not in any idle lotus-tree way, but in a challenging, provocative, disrupting, stimulating manner. . . . Is there anywhere in this country a working model of a service rather than a system, where education is for its own sake and for that moment. . . ? Yes. It is the University of the Third Age."*

Membership of the U3A movement in the UK has continued to grow, contrary to the general trend in later life learning. A new version of *Time to Learn* is necessary, not only for the many thousands of newcomers to our organisation, but to continue to support those who have been members for some time. Learning is the foremost principle of the whole movement.

This principle is enshrined within the Third Age Trust by the establishment of the Standing Committee for Education, agreed at the AGM in the year 2000. Much learning takes place through informal experiences. Most learning, nevertheless, probably does take place with purpose and *More Time to Learn* hopes to encourage U3A members to explore all kinds of ways to indulge their curiosity, to work together and to enjoy the process of co-operative learning.

Acknowledgements

It would be invidious to try to list all the individuals who have helped in the production of *More Time To Learn*. Those who have been intimately concerned with its production have drawn extensively on the work done throughout the UK by many of the organisations and groupings mentioned in the text, national, regional and smaller.

Clearly a handful of people have been most closely involved in the physical production of the text so this group can be mentioned; they were Beryl Mellish, Ian Searle, Keith Richards and Carole Millin. Adam Walton worked on the design. Lin Jonas and her National Office staff have, as always, provided full support with such matters as proofreading, printing and distribution.

Most of all, however, our thanks are due to the great body of volunteers who strive to develop and inspire our learning groups throughout the U3A movement in the UK.

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Aims, Obligations and Definitions

1

Aims, Obligations and Definitions

1.1 Aims and Obligations

1.1.1

The Constitution of the Third Age Trust states:

> *'The objects of the Trust are the advancement of education, and in particular the education of middle-aged and older people who are not in full-time gainful employment'.*

1.1.2

The Trust is a legally constituted body, registered as an educational charity with a responsibility to ensure that U3As provide educational benefits to third agers in their communities and that they adhere to the principles of the U3A movement, particularly with regard to self-help learning.

1.1.3

Two constraints are noted in the Objects and Principles of the U3A Movement, revised in January of 2014:

> *'There is no distinction between the learners and the teachers; they are all U3A members'*

and

> *'No payment is made to members for services rendered'.*

It is not within the ethos of the U3A movement to pay tutors.

1.2 Definitions of terms used

1.2.1

A U3A is an operationally independent, charitable organisation

The Third Age Trust is the national representative body. Its members are the individual Universities of the Third Age in the UK. The Trust is governed by a Board of Trustees, all unpaid, otherwise called the National Executive Committee (NEC), elected by representatives of the U3As. The Board is composed of four elected Officers, (a Chairman, two Vice Chairmen and a Treasurer, who are elected by representatives of U3As at the Annual General Meeting of the Trust) and twelve Regional Trustees, each of whom is elected by the U3As within a geographical region. These regions correspond to the nine Government Regions in England and the countries of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The Trust is funded principally by an annual Capitation Fee, agreed by U3A members at the AGM and paid by all U3As.

A University of the Third Age or U3A is an operationally independent, charitable organisation, responsible for running its own affairs and its own finances, but bound by its membership of the Third Age Trust, to operate within the guiding principles of the U3A movement.

As a member of the Third Age Trust a new U3A agrees to do the following:

- Adhere to the guiding principles of the U3A movement

- Encourage and enable older people no longer in full time paid employment to help each other to share their knowledge, skills, interests and experience
- Promote the values of lifelong learning and the positive attributes of belonging to a U3A
- Do all it can to ensure that people wanting to join a U3A can do so.

The U3A Method is co-operative in nature and self-directed

1.2.2

Interest Groups are members of a U3A who choose to pursue an interest together. The size of such groups varies from as few as two or three to hundreds. The way each group operates, its choice of venue and subject matter, is determined by the group members themselves, operating within the rules of its U3A.

1.2.3

Group Convenors are individuals or several individual members of a group who take on responsibility for its operation. Sometimes there may be one Group Convenor, though experience suggests at least two such persons work more efficiently; sometimes the leadership may vary, pass from one member to another or be shared among a number of members.

1.2.4

Groups' Co-ordinators are members of U3As who undertake to oversee and support the working of the Interest Groups and to assist in creating and facilitating the work of all such Interest Groups in a U3A. They will be members of the Executive Committee of their U3A and may well help on a wider basis, co-operating with other U3As to the mutual benefit of all.

1.2.5

'The **U3A Method**' is a phrase used to describe the method of learning preferred by the U3A movement. It is co-operative in nature and self-directed. It is best described as 'non-formal' in that it is not imposed by an outside body, requires no entrance qualifications and offers no qualifications on completion of a particular course of study. A good mental model of such a method is of a circle of participants, all of whom share their knowledge, skills and experience. It is fully democratic.

Setting up a Group

2

Setting up a Group

2.1 Taking the Lead

In a U3A, even two or three people can make a group. As long as a number of U3A members are willing to share their knowledge or enthusiasm, or simply have the desire to know more, they can, and should form an Interest Group.

- Is a leader necessary?
- Is an expert necessary?
- Is a teacher necessary?

The answer to all of these questions is no.

Obviously for many topics a resident expert is a huge benefit but if one is not available there is always a way of furthering knowledge, experience or interest in a topic within the framework that is the U3A.

A U3A is a learning co-operative of equals. In the words of Peter Laslett, a founder member of the U3A movement,

'Those who teach shall also learn and those who learn shall also teach.'

If a small number of U3A members wish to learn the Japanese language, for example, and no Japanese speaker is available in their U3A they can find online tutorials or DVD courses and support each other through the course. There will probably be lots of laughter and false starts but that will be more stimulating than simply sitting back lamenting the lack of a fluent speaker to teach the language.

2.2 Publicising the Group

Anyone interested in having a new Interest Group in their U3A should inform the Groups' Co-ordinator/s, where such a person or persons exist, or the designated member of the committee. A notice can then be put on the website and/or in a newsletter and an announcement can be made at the monthly meeting asking all of those interested to sign their names on a list. They can then agree to meet at a given place and time.

2.3 Getting Started

At this informal meeting, a simple outline for discussion has been found to be useful. Please see 'First Meeting of an Interest Group' opposite.

First Meeting of an Interest Group

You might like to consider the following:

We would like to . . .

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 (see below)? Who will do what?

What study/learning methods can we use?

- Suggestions for trips/events.
- Volunteer experts who can be invited to demonstrate skills or give occasional talks.
- Books, DVDs.
- PowerPoint.
- Online material or courses.

Remember that people may find it difficult to 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 is helpful to build in changes in delivery and learning/study techniques.

Some presenters may wish to use PowerPoint. There is a bad habit to be avoided here: the presenter should use slides to illustrate what she/he is saying. There is no point in simply reading the words on the screen out loud; assume the audience can read the words and use a different way of explaining your meaning.

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 rotational basis or it might be more convenient to meet at a central point. The type of venue may well depend upon the type of activity. The important thing is to agree about the location/s.

Transport: giving lifts (without obligation) is useful. A standard agreed rate of recompense to share costs avoids embarrassment so check if your U3A has a policy on this.

Communication: a 'telephone tree' is a useful way to get a message around the group quickly. Be aware of data protection aspects of holding contact details. If in doubt, ring the National Office. Regular communication by email, wherever possible, seems to be the most efficient method of keeping in touch.

No one person should have to carry the load of running an Interest Group. Ideally the group should have regular planning meetings 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.

The following tasks need to be assigned at some point (not all will be appropriate to all groups):

- Writing the current programme, preferably as a result of a regular group planning session. (Three times a year is popular.)
- Forwarding the current programme to the group members and to the U3A committee for the newsletter and website. Email should be used wherever possible. Hard copies to non-email users distributed during the sessions should complement this practice.
- Programme management. Some groups might use demonstrations, visits or other occasional extras. Someone needs to organise these aspects of the programme.
- Paying for venues, always through the U3A treasurer, unless specifically agreed otherwise.
- Tea/coffee arrangements.
- Equipment booking and set-up.
- Keeping a register of attendees and collecting any funds to be forwarded to the treasurer, in accordance with your U3A's guidelines.
- Programme delivery/leading each session. This can be your resident expert but if not, each session can be led by one person, a pair, a trio or any combination of these in rotation. U3As are about participation and supporting each other in informal study and enjoyment.

Some of these tasks may be carried out by the same person, and in truth they often are, but Interest Groups benefit when they are shared. The added bonus is that where sharing the load becomes the culture of your U3A, experience seems to suggest that recruiting people to run Interest Groups becomes easier because they are not expected to do everything.

2.4 Encouraging 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. Bald negativity tends to restrict the part of the brain that produces creative and problem-solving thoughts but constructive criticism should be encouraged.

At a glance

- **Do not reject any ideas at first**
- **Try to link ideas and develop them**
- **Encourage individuals to investigate ideas**
- **Only at a given point move to practicalities**
- **Record all ideas**

Someone will need to lead the planning session and someone will need to keep notes and then record the final plan.

Try to encourage positive attitudes:

- Encouraging
- Supporting agreed standards
- Diagnostic
- Mediating
- Showing approval
- Relieving tension or anxiety

Try to discourage negative attitudes:

- Aggressiveness
- Blocking
- Negative personal anecdotes
- Competing
- Seeking group sympathy
- Seeking recognition
- Withdrawal

In fact this model can work for all problem-solving discussions!

2.5 Group Dynamics

U3A workshops (see 3.9) and meetings on various topics have often found Bruce Tuckman's theory of group dynamics interesting and useful. It is in the light of the positive feedback received that it is offered to you here.

Bruce Tuckman, an Australian psychologist was working on a wealth of empirical evidence regarding the way that groups of all kinds formed and developed. He formulated a theory commonly summarised as

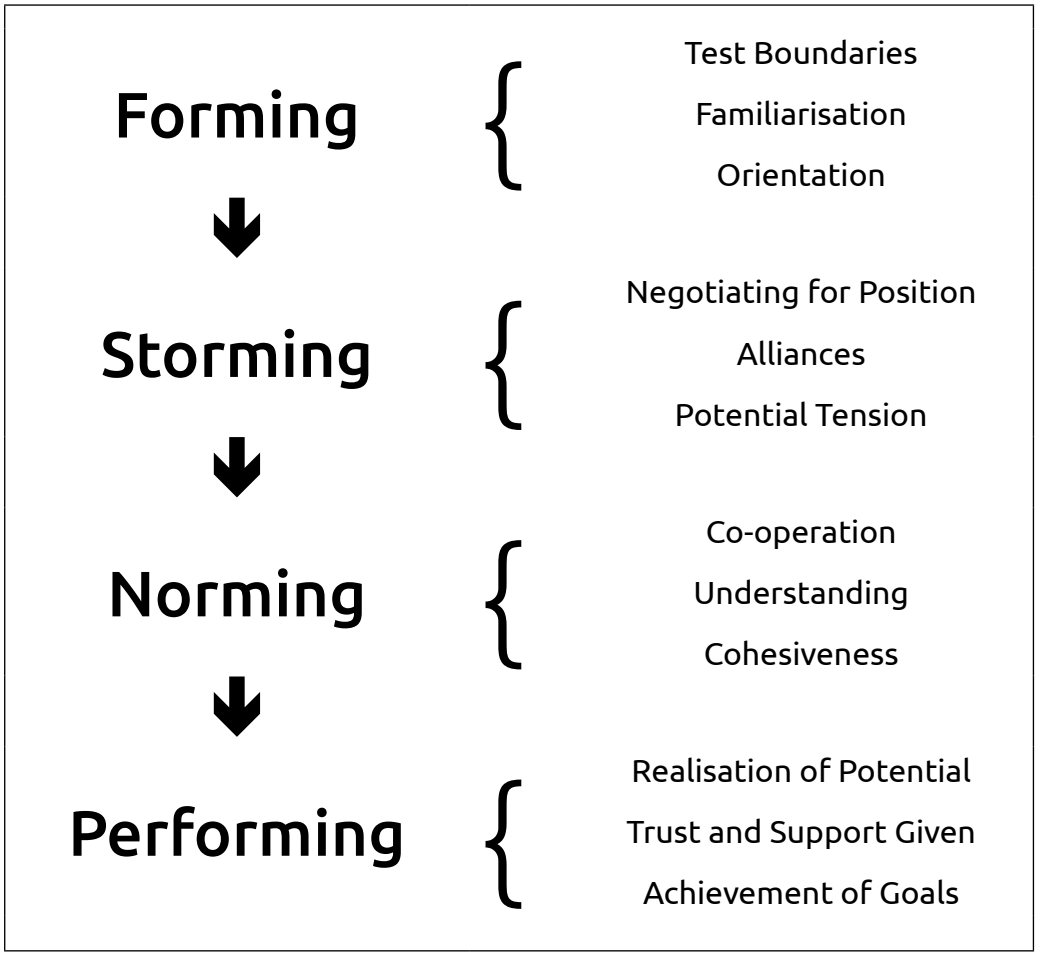
'FORMING, STORMING, NORMING and PERFORMING'

This theory has been used and adapted in many contexts but if we return to his own summary notes we can see it has a useful application to what we do in U3A.

Although summarising the group dynamic into four headings, Tuckman realised that not all groups progress through the stages equally or indeed at all. Some may get stuck at

one stage or another, some may return to a previous stage as the group membership changes and have to go through stages again.

Tuckman did propose that to reach the final stage of his original four stages, groups needed to go through all four stages, to a greater or lesser extent, to reach fulfilment.



Stages one and two are quite straightforward. At first people are on their best behaviour, gently testing boundaries and realising that some group members are more on their wavelength than others. As the group moves into the second stage, the more outgoing members of the group may vie for dominance, seeking control or acceptance of their opinions without dissent! Alliances may be formed; these may become cliques.

The third stage can appear to be a creditable achievement but it is at this stage that the group can become too comfortable, too exclusive of new ideas, or new members, and too set in their ways. In U3A, an Interest Group can exhibit these tendencies and actively discourage new members or new ideas. This would be in conflict with the U3A ethos and so being aware of this potential stage of development can help those members who organise our Interest Groups to work through this stage onto the next, and more productive, stage.

By the fourth stage, the group is confident and welcoming of new ideas, embracing development, not fearing change. New ideas can be discussed and accepted, adapted or rejected, but are not seen as a threat.

It is important to remember here that some groups never move out of stage one, while some self-combust at stage two. Many groups can rest on their laurels at stage three but many move on to stage four and flourish there.

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Participative Learning

3

Participative Learning

This section outlines various methods by which a group may operate. There is no one correct method and it may well be advantageous to employ a variety, even within one session. The emphasis throughout is on active participation by all members of the group.

The italicised sections comprise practical suggestions from U3As which Interest Groups and their members will find useful.

3.1 Shared Delivery (sometimes simply referred to as shared learning)

The term 'shared delivery' is used in this context to mean that several individual members of a group, perhaps all of them, take it in turns to contribute or lead the group.

At a glance

- **Planning essential**
- **Informal**
- **Session leadership changes hands**
- **Practical aspects shared**
- **Participation celebrated**

The subject matter of the group itself may offer the opportunity to be divided into a number of separate topics. Individuals, pairs or other subgroups may then make themselves more knowledgeable in one of the topics so that they can pass on their newly acquired knowledge. Often members may feel diffident about taking the lead, in which case they will need both support and patience, but in undertaking presentations to the rest of the group they will be learning. To move from the acquisition of knowledge or skill to using it actively in some form of presentation is to take a further step up the learning ladder.

All group activities can lend themselves to this approach, some more obviously than others. Members of a music group may take it in turns to arrange a programme, to research the composers of the pieces and to introduce them or the programme itself. History may well be approached in a similar way. An interesting variation on the theme of sharing the learning within a group is the 'sideways' history group. This group takes on a decade and each member then sets about investigating what was happening all over the globe during this period, at continental, national or even city level. Suddenly history becomes less of a parade of dates, less chronologically ordered, and encompasses several types of empire, other civilisations and religions and different ways of life which all took place at the same time. Each researcher presents his or her findings to the rest of the group.

In all this, forward planning is essential and those responsible for a particular session must have sufficient time to prepare or research.

Once a programme has been agreed, it should be written down and circulated to all members of the group.

No one should be expected to take the lead unless she/he is ready to do so. To oblige or embarrass someone into a leading role is likely to be counterproductive. On the other hand, those who undertake it usually learn a great deal themselves.

Visual and audio aids should be ordered well in advance and someone will need to ensure the necessary equipment is working and ready. Tactful advice on making oneself audible is also to be advised, probably something best discussed at the planning stage.

Seating arrangements should be informal. To arrange all the chairs facing forward, especially in ordered rows, suggests a 'them and me' arrangement. The best arrangement is often a circle, but make sure all visual aids can be clearly seen.

It is enough for the speakers to be responsible for the contents of the meeting and, if desired, to enter into discussion with the others, but they should not also be lumbered with setting out the chairs and similar mundane tasks. The rest of the group should be supportive in such matters.

3.2 Seminars

Seminars by definition are planned carefully. They can be effective for network study days (see 3.10), as well as more formally structured groups, as a means of involving all the participants and drawing on their combined experience.

At a glance

- **Forward planning vital**
- **Material prepared and sent out in advance**
- **Participants read, consider and reflect upon it**
- **Time management crucial**
- **Outcome planned**

In advance of the day, all participants will be sent not only a copy of the proposed programme but much more information, together with the request to research and think about the topics; thus they should come to the seminar itself quite well-prepared and having considered their own attitudes and opinions on the topics to be discussed.

Typically the group in question often begins with a general discussion, introduced by one person, then subdivides into smaller subgroups. Subgroups should not be too big, or too small (somewhere between five and eight is good) but the size of the room and the acoustics should be taken into account. Each subgroup will be given a number of discussion points to consider and the results are noted by one of its members. At the end of an allotted time, say half an hour, the subgroups recombine and their deliberations are reported to the rest. A full discussion then ensues.

Seminars are most successful if there is a strict timetable imposed. This means in practical terms that there has to be someone in charge who insists on keeping to the given times - a chairman, in effect.

The emphasis throughout is on active participation by all members of the group

Seminars are a very good way to think through a whole range of subject matter and, because of the time allocated to preparing the ground, the contributions made by individual members are more weighty. They can prove useful when thinking of forward planning. Keeping the subgroups relatively small ensures that everyone has a greater chance of being heard and of influencing the whole group in the general discussion.

Almost any subject area can benefit from this technique. However, it is important that the topics for discussion in the subgroups are carefully listed and, where possible, each subgroup investigates a separate issue. This means a wider coverage in depth becomes possible than is the case with only general group discussion.

A group of people should plan the seminar well in advance. Timing is essential for each part of the day.

The layout of the accommodation may limit the way subgroups can meet. Ideally there should be areas or rooms separated so that the subgroups do not interfere one with another and everyone can be heard clearly.

One person in each subgroup should undertake the job of making notes and presenting the findings in the plenary session which follows.

Often a seminar can be a policy-making session and the recommendations can be translated into plans for the future.

Since much of the time will be spent sitting in discussion, ensure the temperature in the room is appropriate, try to supply water on the tables and allow opportunities from time to time to stretch the legs.

3.3 Discussion

Some groups are set up with discussion as their primary function. The educational value of a discussion is proportional to the discipline employed by the listeners rather than the cleverness of the person speaking. There is a real skill in listening.

At a glance

- **Can be formal or informal**
- **Chairman prevents straying from topic**
- **Agreed Code of Conduct useful**
- **One person to speak at a time**
- **Plenary or summary**

At the more formal end of the spectrum, discussion can be controlled by a chairman who tries to ensure the contributions made by individuals are relevant to the subject under discussion and are not purely personal reminiscence or strong opinions expressed without evidence to back them up. Comments should conform to standards of decency (no bad or offensive language, no personal attacks or sneers). Serious groups should allow only one speaker at a time and this is best accomplished with a chairman in charge. If the discussion is really important, and is to lead to decisions affecting the future of the group, then formality becomes more important. This kind of discussion is close to the formality of an organised meeting and it may be a good idea to keep notes, if not minutes, for future reference.

Planning, in itself, is an activity which depends on discussion and it is essential to keep detailed notes. Sometimes discussions are part of seminars, mentioned earlier, and are based on worksheets or other information prepared beforehand.

If the group is informal, there still needs to be a set of ground rules made at the start. Most people will be polite and not engage in personal invective, but the group should set the rules at the beginning.

There may be a tendency for individuals to hog the limelight and for others to remain almost silent much of the time. A good group will encourage the timid to offer views but it is sometimes hard to curb the more talkative members. Again, the rules must vary according to the group in question; totally informal groups may well chatter happily, with several people talking at once. This can encourage individuals to contribute to the general talk, even though their contribution may not be well heard. Discussion may arise as a result of a casual remark made by one of the group. The purpose of the discussion will affect the way it is best organised. If it is simply a casual pastime, then there may not be a lot of substance but the conversation/discussion may lead to a better, more socially

cohesive group.

Discussion should not be another word for individuals to state opinions but not listen to others. The chairman should ensure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and should not allow individuals to dominate.

It is generally better for one person to speak at a time.

Seating arrangements are important and the best arrangement is probably in a circle where everyone can see everyone else.

It is important that people listen politely rather than talk across the speaker.

Establish ground rules about manners of address and permissible language, and avoid personal comments.

In serious debates it is advisable to allow members only a limited time to speak and only one opportunity to do so.

There should be no limit to the subjects that are open to discussion but many U3As believe it is as well to avoid strongly held beliefs, political or religious, unless the group is very well integrated.

Regular discussion groups may need their members to provide topics for discussion. For example, these can be taken from recent newspapers and magazines and be chosen by volunteers who bring them to the meeting; they are then placed in a hat or a box and drawn out at random. Subjects of interest to individuals can be written down on slips of paper and treated in the same way.

3.4 Learning by Playing

Some groups meet with the overt intention of just having fun (see Eric Midwinter as quoted in the preface). They may take pleasure in playing various games, in chatting over a cup of coffee or in joining together to prepare an entertainment for the U3A. One of the characteristics of U3A members is their enjoyment of sharing time with like-minded people, and that leads to their finding common pursuits. These may be as simple as visiting the theatre or going out to eat, but those who share these interests are already on the way to forming a group. In a sense, playing in this context can mean forming a 'seeding group', from which other joint interests will flow.

At a glance

- **Physical and/or mental exercise**
- **Social aspect to the fore**
- **Interactive**
- **Equipment and/or travel often required**
- **Can involve extra cost**

There are certainly other activities which have benefits, both in terms of mental stimulation and physical exercise. All exercise can be valuable, and can even help with the blood supply to the brain.

Social games and activities have a part to play in the happy functioning of a U3A. Card games of all kinds, like whist and bridge, and board games like Scrabble depend on short-term memory and can help to cement social links. More active pastimes like dancing,

table tennis and archery are valuable in that they provide regular physical exercise and, as in the case of dancing, often involve memorising steps in a sequence.

Encourage talking.

Some members should make sure the group has enough of the correct equipment for each session (e.g. enough Scrabble sets to allow for extra players).

Arrange rooms and equipment for activities like dancing or table tennis and investigate size, seating arrangements and probable costs well in advance.

3.5 Demonstrations

When the group's purpose includes the learning of a special skill, demonstrations can be useful, especially when illustrating basic principles.

At a glance

- **Experts pass on skills**
- **Emphasis must be on learner, not demonstrator**
- **Usually involves equipment**
- **Everyone must be able to see the demonstration in comfort**
- **A healthy, safe environment is important**

Anyone who is to demonstrate a skill clearly needs to be proficient but it does not always follow that she/he will also be good at explaining the process in question. We have all probably experienced well-meaning tuition from which it is impossible to learn. In some cases, the skill to be taught is more appropriately learned on a one-to-one basis, provided there are enough proficient members to demonstrate individually to others.

If members of the group are themselves to give demonstrations they should always remember that the purpose is to show the rest how to do something, not merely to exhibit their own skill. They should allow time for learners to practise the skill for themselves and it is as well to break down the skills into easily digestible stages. It can be inspiring to watch a skilled artisan at work but it can also be off-putting to a beginner, who may feel she/he is a long way from such expertise and decide it is not really worth continuing. Encouragement is essential.

Arts and handicrafts often benefit from demonstrations. Practical skills of this sort require not only understanding of technique but much practice. A skilled artist may demonstrate which brushes to use for different effects or how to apply various watercolour washes and how to mix colours. All of this is useful, but it is the practising which will involve the group more fully. Card and paper craftwork, paper folding and wood turning can all benefit from demonstrations.

The purpose is to show the rest how to do something, not merely to exhibit their own skill

Where applicable, safety issues should be considered and explained.

A demonstration needs to be slow enough for observers to understand the process, if necessary by breaking it down into its component stages.

The room needs to be arranged so that everyone has a clear view and can hear properly.

Ideally, there should be every opportunity for the observers to ask for clarification of each stage of the process.

It is always worth emphasising to beginners to computing that, short of hitting it with

a hammer, you will not ordinarily damage a computer.

3.6 Visits

Free bus travel makes it easier to organise visits within the locality, though more ambitious events may require further planning. Often visits are incidental, as when a drama group books seats in a theatre, but often excursions can be integral to the purpose of the group. Industrial archaeology, for instance, is far more vivid when derelict sites can be inspected first-hand. In all cases a visit enlivens the group and can inspire members.

At a glance

- **Management of numbers and finances crucial**
- **Limited numbers for most visits**
- **Treasurer must be involved**
- **Participants must be briefed regarding timings, equipment needed, refreshments and focus of visit**
- **Social aspect important**

Stately homes can provide a historical perspective. Some may even have thrived as a result of local industry, such as agriculture or mining. This leads to new avenues for exploration. There may well be opportunities for art or photographic groups to use the visit to produce interesting images. One idea which has been tried by U3A groups is to organise a visit, themed to reflect the venue. A visit to a Victorian house, for instance, could inspire a history group, a gardening group or an architecture group. It could enthuse a group to find appropriate recipes and experiment with foodstuffs. A craft group might explore the materials and the costumes of the time of the early occupation of the house. There could be appropriate literature for the book group to read and potential work for the creative writing group.

Almost any group can benefit from a field trip; some depend on them. Architecture, geology, bird watching and botanical studies of all kinds cannot really work without outside visits. Sketching and painting, especially out of doors, is a healthy and interesting practice, while visits to museums and galleries, even visits to other U3As and network meetings can all bring rich rewards and inspire.

Planning and forethought are the essential ingredients of a successful and enjoyable outing. It works best to have a small planning group who are fairly knowledgeable about travelling in general but one person should co-ordinate the group to avoid confusion.

Bear in mind the distance to be travelled. Comfort stops are essential and so have to be carefully planned. Many coach firms are familiar with convenient stopping places and will offer advice.

Many places of interest offer free familiarisation visits for interest group representatives and, if the distance is not too far, it is well worthwhile taking advantage of these as you can actually see for yourself what is on offer and take note of times and distances.

A great deal of information is available by telephone and/or by searching the internet and the more details which can be discovered, the better. Most destinations provide helpful literature and information and in some cases they even provide individual brochures for a group. Essential details such as the distance you will need to walk,

steps, lifts, disabled access, toilets, menus and eating places must be investigated and verified.

Ask whether there is free parking for the coach. If a fee is charged, then this must be divided and included in the overall price charged, along with any entry fees.

If a town is to be included in the visit, a simple map is very useful, marked with coach drop-off and pick-up points. If possible, the Group Leader's mobile phone number should be written on it to save a lot of waiting around.

Good communication with coach companies is essential. They have experienced drivers and, on the whole, are very helpful. The route can be discussed with them and tailor-made to your request. They will need to know the exact pick-up points and times for the group so that they can work out their route and costs. It is worthwhile contacting two or three companies as prices can differ greatly. Type out a list of who is getting on, where and when, and give a copy to a reliable participant at each pick-up point to act as a 'sheep dog'. Names should be ticked off as they board the coach.

Coach enquiries should be made well ahead of the expected travel date to ensure that a coach of suitable size is available. It is best to get estimates for different coach sizes unless the final number is already known.

Theatre outings should be publicised and booked well in advance in order to get the seats you want. A block booking, e.g. three rows of 15, behind each other, is more sociable than one long row of 45. There is more opportunity for social interaction that way. It is best to slightly overbook tickets initially if you can take advantage of a cancellation period later. This avoids having to book late seats separated from the rest.

The question of payment must be decided beforehand. Some entry fees have to be pre-paid and certainly coach fees are set beforehand. This means that the fares must be divided by the number travelling - not an easy task to estimate at times. Numbers fluctuate even up to the last moment, but make the ruling that, once a payment has been made, no money will be returned unless that place can be filled. U3As are not out to make a profit, but neither do they want to lose money. In some cases, even though a certain number has been booked, the venue will only charge for people actually present. In that case you can refund the entrance money, but the coach fare is forfeited as that cannot be altered.

A gratuity for the coach driver can either be included in the fare or collected by passing a bag around in the coach. These financial details, however, are a matter for individual groups to decide.

If there is a member who is severely disabled, either physically or mentally, U3A cannot provide care or a carer. If that member wishes to attend with their own carer, U3A indemnity insurance will cover both passengers, providing the carer is not employed.

If in doubt about any of this, contact the National Office.

NB. No money should ever go through a member's personal bank account; all monies must go through the Treasurer and the appropriate U3A account.

3.7 Shared Learning Projects

Shared Learning Projects are like many other learning methods. The essential feature of all Shared Learning Projects is that they involve one or more U3As working together or with outside organisations or institutions and, if the latter, they will usually carry out

research proposed by the institution so they are examples of an extended kind of co-operation.

At a glance

- **A U3A works with an outside organisation and/or other U3As**
- **Projects planned as joint ventures**
- **Projects usually last around 12 weeks**
- **Additional support available on website and from regional SLP contacts**
- **Projects have an outcome (e.g. publication/presentation)**

The planning team in the U3A explores, with the Lifelong Learning Officer at a local museum, for example, the possibility of setting up a project. The proposal is advertised so that members of other U3As can join in and a team is then organised. In most cases, a member of the museum staff will attend meetings to give advice and help steer participants as they undertake research. Further information can be obtained from the national website including contact details for the National and Regional SLP Co-ordinators.

The projects normally last for twelve weeks and conclude with a presentation or other agreed outcome. Some groups have produced a short booklet on the results of the research or information for visitors or a contribution to the institution's website. The outcomes of these SLPs are not merely interesting but of practical use to the institution itself. The topic covered can be historical, artistic, literary, scientific, photographic, and often involves an exploration of archives. Some of these projects are academically challenging and some are less demanding. The participants enjoy meeting and working with members of other U3As, carrying out research, and contributing to worthwhile projects. The methods employed depend on the persons organising it, influenced by the professionals at the institution in negotiation with both the U3A organiser and the individuals themselves.

When no local outside institution exists, projects can be organised between U3As. They may research, for example, a local history topic or a local coastline, or undertake a reading project.

3.8 Using Online Resources

There is a vast amount of online material of all kinds available to individuals and groups. One such resource is our own online courses and U3A members also have access to those produced by U3A Online in Australia. They cover a wide range of subject matter and may be of use to existing groups. For instance there are several courses which cover aspects of writing and some writing groups have already made use of them. Any member of the group can download the course week by week and the whole group may then work through the various units.

At a glance

- **Study material provided**
- **Wealth of material available implies preliminary research advisable**
- **May be available generally or only at certain times**
- **May be used in group or individually**
- **Some computer skills essential**

It is hardly necessary to point out that a prime essential is access to the internet if such

material is to be used, but only one member of the group needs such provision and the ability to download the units and distribute them, subject to any copyright restrictions.

A ready-made course may at the very least provide a little relief for a group which is having a problem thinking of new ideas for themselves. Most online courses not only provide information but also suggest discussion points or even assignments for the participants.

One kind of study group has developed which offers a very good way to use online courses; the members look at the list of available courses and agree among themselves which ones particularly interest them. They then choose one which they follow as a group, meeting regularly to work through the material week by week or month by month. When they finish one such course, they choose another. One U3A has worked through a number of courses this way, including the movement of tectonic plates, philosophy and an introduction to the history and culture of China. Since there are now over fifty online courses available from U3A Online alone, they are unlikely to run out of material, and, apart from the practical needs of finding a venue and a mutually agreeable time to meet, there is no need for anyone to organise learning material.

A further way to exploit online resources, especially material available from many universities in the form of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), is to sign up individually for such a course and MOOCs usually offer an online forum for participants to share their ideas and comments.

3.9 Workshops

Workshops are meetings, often organised on a wider scale than within one U3A, at which the participants find themselves practising or learning new skills. They can also contribute to the wider development of U3A at national, regional or individual U3A level. Information is sent in advance to advise participants what to expect, but no one can expect to attend such a workshop without being prepared to contribute.

At a glance

- **Interactive**
- **Theoretical and practical**
- **Structured discussions**
- **Has an outcome that can be useful**
- **Participants leave with a new perspective**

3.10 Other opportunities for Sharing Learning

Participating in a joint interest need not be confined within your own U3A as the section 3.7 (Shared Learning Projects) indicates. An advantage to belonging to a national (even world-wide) movement is that ideas can be very widely shared. Your own U3A is part of this wider movement; it can be envisaged as the centre of a series of connections.

Your network (which might be called by another name such as link, neighbourhood or association) consists of a voluntary group of U3As which are happy to work together for specific purposes. Such groupings may arrange meetings, workshops, seminars and other activities.

Your region, if it has a Regional Committee, may also organise workshops and seminars and other joint activities at which ideas can be exchanged. It may have connections with other organisations and universities which are of interest and some regions arrange regular residential schools and other events.

The Third Age Trust itself organises events nationally, including the Conference and Annual General Meeting, and it has become traditional to include a range of activities which offer learning opportunities. The Trust also organises two residential Summer Schools, which run for three days at a time. Special events are increasing in range and number every year and are listed on the national website.

IAUTA, the International Association of Universities of the Third Age, and the Asia Pacific Alliance of U3As also hold regular conferences at which you can learn how U3As work in other parts of the world. The models are extremely varied.

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The Role of the Committee

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The Role of the Committee

All members of a U3A committee are ***de facto*** trustees of their own U3A. This means they are legally obliged to ensure that all the activities of their U3A are carried out in pursuance of the Objects or Purposes as stated in their constitution. The model constitution, approved by the regulatory authorities for use by U3As in the UK, states the aim of each U3A is:

> *To advance education, in particular the education of people not in gainful employment who are in their third age (being the period of time after the first age of childhood dependence and the second age of full-time employment and/or parental responsibility).*

All U3As sign to uphold the Objects and Principles of the U3A movement which were revised by the Third Age Trust in January 2014.

The Trustees of the Third Age Trust are similarly obliged to ensure the compliance of their members, the individual U3As, with the charitable purposes and objects of the movement.

Whenever a new member of the committee is appointed, he or she should become familiar with the constitution and in particular the aims as stated, as well as the Objects and Principles. A good practice would be for the committee to carry out a review at the first meeting after every AGM. In such a review the committee, led by the Chairman, might ask the following questions:

- Do we seek to enable our members to meet for the purposes of learning?
- Do all our activities encourage a learning element?
- Do we seek to provide opportunities for other third agers to join our U3A?
- Do we adequately support those members who organise our Interest Groups?
- Do we have a Groups' Co-ordinator and, if so, do we support him/her in every way we can?
- Learning activities should be enjoyable, (see Eric Midwinter as quoted in the preface), but are we sure we have the balance right?
- Are we open to new ideas? Do we actively seek new ideas?
- Are our members able to participate fully in all our activities?
- Are we enablers, in line with the U3A's Objects and Principles, expecting our members to take a more active part and to contribute to the activities?

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Supporting our Group Convenors

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Supporting our Group Convenors

5.1 Our Self-help Method

The ethos of U3A is participation, not the conventional teacher/class relationship. Members who lead our Interest Group sessions will come from a range of backgrounds. Experience has indicated that many who could volunteer to become a Group Convenor refrain from volunteering because they feel they have no appropriate experience and know of no available support.

Many U3As feel that Convenors are a group in themselves and need to get together to share ideas, discuss problems and find solutions (participation). Do those involved with running and/or promoting Interest Groups need to meet on a regular basis?

Consider:

- Is it easy to recruit new Group Convenors?
- Do you have new Interest Groups starting at fairly regular intervals?
- Are Group Convenors aware of issues that need to be addressed?
- Is your ratio of Interest Groups to members sufficient? According to the 2013 Interest Group survey, the national average is one Interest Group for every seven members.
- Are your Group Convenors happy and do you consult them often enough to find out?
- Do your Interest Groups understand and follow the U3A ethos?
- Are your Interest Groups aware of the support that is available from the Third Age Trust, the region and the networks?

If the answer to some of these is no, then maybe there is scope for regular meetings.

5.2 Support Mechanism

Many U3As, regions and networks have regular meetings for their Group Convenors and Groups' Co-ordinators in order to support the work of those who are the very backbone of the U3A movement.

The advantages of such meetings are generally thought to be:

- Mutual support
- Ongoing development within Interest Groups
- Keeping enthusiasm alive through varied approaches to learning
- Reinforcement of the U3A ethos
- Induction of new Group Convenors
- Recruitment of additional Group Convenors who appreciate that a support model is in place.

5.3 Organising Regular Group Convenor Meetings

In order to minimise dissatisfaction it is important to make the style and format of meetings clear, to ensure the participants know what to expect. This means that the organisers need to decide on the level of structure they wish to implement and this level

needs to be suited to the purpose of the meeting.

Meeting styles will vary according to the perceived needs of the meeting.

These three categories (below) are intended as general indications of meeting styles. What seems to be most effective is that the organisers decide on the outcome that they wish to achieve and match the meeting style to suit it. There is no one size fits all format and mix and match may be the most suitable style. Discussion is usually based upon small groups discussing different topics and, perhaps, rotating through a programme of issues.

Generally, meetings are organised on a continuum from minimum structure to maximum structure.

Minimum Structure	Middling Structure	Maximum Structure
No pre-determined input. Open/free discussion, often in groups, on general or varied topics supplied by organisers or culled from participants. A summary of the discussion is then circulated to attendees.	A short general presentation to provide a thematic focus or information. Directed discussion, often in groups, on topics related to the theme or subject of the meeting. Some decisions are made or conclusions are drawn and then circulated to the attendees.	The meeting has a theme or focus that has been publicised in some detail. A presentation will provide a thinking model and material that will inform the subsequent discussion. Topics are prepared for discussion and processing, usually in pre-arranged groups, in accordance with the planned outcome of the meeting. Policy or support is agreed and circulated to the appropriate target audience.

If successful, a meeting of Group Convenors should provide the topics or themes for further meetings to explore ways in which support can be developed.

Please see overleaf for the advantages and disadvantages of the various meeting structures.

Meeting Structure - *Advantages and Disadvantages*

Minimum Structure

Advantages	Disadvantages
Informal atmosphere. Everyone has a chance to speak. Networking and informal exchanges of ideas are easily achieved. Less work for the organisers. A wide range of topics can be covered. Outcome will be defined by the meeting.	A few people can dominate. It can result in a repeat of the same old topics/anecdotes. If a whole day in duration, non-stop discussion groups can become tedious. Success depends, very much, upon having the answers and quality information in the room. They might not be there!

Middling Structure

Advantages	Disadvantages
A short presentation gives a lead and sets the tone. Discussion groups can benefit from being given a range of discussion points. Notification of these points beforehand can aid productive discussion. Differing activities throughout the meeting keep participants more alert. It can produce a more focussed outcome.	This format is more work for the organisers than the Minimum Structure format. Some participants can always object to being organised. There will be less time for networking and open discussion. Topics for discussion are decided prior to the meeting and therefore limited.

Maximum Structure

Advantages	Disadvantages
It can address identified issues with minimum distraction. It can produce positive 'grass roots up' results in the way of policy, advice, support and solutions. It ensures the relevance and accuracy of the information disseminated (as much as is possible). Can be stimulating as it ensures the introduction of material that will be new to, at least some, participants.	It requires well-researched resources and excellent administration so is more work for the organisers than the other formats. Some participants will not like the formality. It has the minimum time for networking and open discussion. The programme is limited. It can feel too much like being back at work!

5.4 Possible Discussion Topics

The following examples have been found to be useful at Group Convenor meetings. The list is by no means exhaustive but is passed on in the best tradition of U3A, sharing that which might be of use.

5.4.1 General Topics

- The Groups' Co-ordinator's Role.

  Do all U3As need a Groups' Co-ordinator? If not, why not?

  What do they do?

  Should they have a 'tool kit'?

  What could go into such a 'tool kit'?

  What is their relationship with other U3As?

- The Group Convenor's Role.

  How do we find Group Convenors?

  How do they get started?

  How do they keep things going?

  Do they need a handbook?

  What are the different methods of running a group?

  Are groups permanent or time limited?

- Finding Information.

  How can you make use of:
  - U3A Resource Centre?
  - National Subject Advisers?
  - Sources Educational Journal?
  - Online courses?
  - Shared Learning Projects?
  - Local U3As?
  - Summer Schools – national and regional?
  - Members' own skills?
  - Wiley's 'Older and Wiser' series of books?
  - University/college/school links?
  - Open University?
  - BBC material?
  - The Internet?
  - Libraries and museums?
  - National Trust and English Heritage?
  - Books?

- Coping with problems.

  Who should deal with common problems such as:
  - Organising finances?
  - Ailing groups?
  - Disruptive members?
  - Poor attendees?
  - Non-participative members?
  - Over-vociferous members?

5.4.2 Single Issue Discussion Topics:

- How could we encourage suggestions for new Interest Groups and therefore keep our U3A lively and dynamic?
- How can we encourage sharing the responsibility for running the Interest Groups?
- What strategies could be put in place to manage finance within the Interest Groups and to provide support by and for the committee?
- How can we maintain vitality and enthusiasm over time?
- How do we deal with an Interest Group that is too popular?
- How can we encourage group members to participate whilst ensuring we do not push them out of their comfort zone?
- How can we ensure that Interest Groups follow the U3A ethos without becoming too heavy handed?
- What three main points should someone leading an Interest Group session have in mind as an informal code of conduct to ensure harmony as far as is possible?
- How do we cope with the group member who wishes to dominate?
- How do we cope with inappropriate behaviour, such as constant complaining, off-colour jokes, overheated responses, sly digs at another member/the leader?

More detailed information on running workshops/meetings for those involved in Interest Groups can be found on the U3A website.

The Trust provides support in running Group Convenor meetings. If you are interested contact the National Office.

Resources

6

Resources

6.1 Members

The primary resource of any U3A is its own members. A well-organised group will attract a range of individuals with a correspondingly wide experience and it is this which provides the first source of knowledge and information for the group. The very fact that individuals are interested in the subject of the group activity means that some of them will know something about it already. They will probably be able to suggest lines of enquiry as well as sources of information.

The primary resource of any U3A is its own members

6.2 U3A Information

If the U3A has been running for any length of time, one or other of the Interest Groups may have created an information file. If this has not yet been done, it is a good idea for Group Leaders to start producing such files now.

6.3 Resource Centre

For a great many groups the Trust's Resource Centre is especially helpful. The Manager of the Resource Centre is a highly trained librarian who is more than happy to advise enquirers by telephone or email. The Centre has a very large stock of useful non-book material. The most popular materials are DVDs and CDs, all available to borrow at no cost other than the cost of returning them by post. Details are to be found, together with a catalogue, via the national website and items can be ordered online.

6.4 Sources

The Third Age Trust also publishes an educational journal, *Sources*, three times a year. It is sent free to anyone who receives *Third Age Matters*. Each issue focuses on a particular subject area and contains particularly useful and interesting articles by Interest Group members throughout the UK. All the back copies of *Sources* are archived and available to members on the national website.

6.5 Subject Advisers

Subject Advisers are individual U3A members who are willing to help within their own specialist area. They can provide information about suitable material for individual subjects. Contact details are available on the national website and in *Third Age Matters*.

6.6 National Events

Workshops, seminars and events often produce reports which contain useful information. These reports can be found on the national website. They may well quote verbatim from talks, demonstrations and lectures such as those given at the national conferences and AGMs. Many such events concentrate on specialist areas of knowledge and contain many nuggets worth digging for.

6.7 Online Courses

A wide range of untutored online courses is available to U3A members. Since 1999, there have been two main sources for courses devised and provided by U3A members. The first group of such courses, chronologically speaking, has been created by U3A Online in

Australia (www.u3aonline.org.au). The second group has been developed by the Third Age Trust and can be found on the national website. The Trust's courses are free of charge to U3A members; access to the Australian courses requires a membership fee.

6.8 Libraries

Do not forget your local library service. In spite of severe cuts in recent years, the public libraries offer an enormous support to all members of the public. The librarians are very willing and able to help. In some cases they may even help find multiple copies of books and plays. Beware of copyright restrictions when using such material.

6.9 Internet

The biggest expansion of provision is to be found on the Internet. A word of caution here, however: do not blindly accept all the information you can find on the internet, but try insofar as possible to verify it by cross-checking. With that proviso, a huge amount of material can be obtained quickly and simply.

6.10 MOOCs

Since 2008, a number of universities and other educational establishments have produced Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). These are published on a number of websites under the Creative Commons Licence, which means they are free to use. Many such courses are highly specialised, as one might expect given their source. There are many courses of about ten weeks which were originally produced to support undergraduate learning from information technology and economics to science and philosophy. There are literally hundreds of such courses and a good place to start looking is on the Coursera website (www.coursera.org). In 2013 the Open University, which already offered Creative Commons material under its OpenLearn website, set up a separate body, FutureLearn which offers a diverse selection of free, high-quality online courses from some of the world's leading universities, many of them in the UK.

6.11 Local Associations

Specialist organisations such as local history associations, family history associations, local museums, county archives can provide useful information and sometimes provide speakers. A growing source recently has been the local universities; close connections may yield such privileges as use of the university library, or even in some cases, free access to undergraduate lectures.

Conclusion

We hope this new booklet will be especially useful to U3A committees, Groups' Co-ordinators and the U3A members who organise our Interest Groups, as well as the members who are about to take on such roles.

Notes

Notes

THE THIRD AGE TRUST
U3A
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

Universities of the Third Age exist throughout the UK and provide a wide range of learning opportunities for their members.

The Third Age Trust is the national representative body for the U3A Movement and underpins the work of the U3As.

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