

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.

The Interest Groups' Co-ordinator

Where U3As have an interest groups' co-ordinator, it is usually a member of the committee whose advice and help will be invaluable to any new interest group setting up. The usual responsibilities will be:

- Timetabling 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 leaders on all aspects of group leadership.
- Canvassing for new group leaders.
- Organising group leader meetings for inter-communication, social and other purposes e.g. discussing new initiatives.
- Speaking up for and supporting group leaders generally and devising ways for the U3A to show its appreciation of its group leaders.
- Liaising with the committee on all aspects of interest groups.

Starting an interest group

Anyone wishing to start an interest group should notify the Interest Groups' Co-ordinator, where one exists or the designated member of the committee. A notice can then be put in the newsletter 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 informally discuss the framework of the group. A leader for the group may arise prior to the meeting, or as a natural consequence of the meeting. If people are reluctant at this stage to put themselves forward, a leader may still emerge once the group starts meeting.

The Interest Groups' Co-ordinator or designated committee member may well play a vital role here helping to seek out a suitable person to lead and then encouraging them.

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

Setting Goals. This should be a whole group activity and you might like to consider the following to guide your thinking on this:

We would like to (should include the range and nature of the subject to be studied, the time scale etc.).

How can we achieve this? Where and when to meet? How long will each session be? (Costs will no doubt be minimal, but there may be some dependent on how your U3A is financed). What common knowledge exists within the group already? How will the group be organised? (See below). Who will do what ?

How shall we go about our learning? What resources are available in our chosen area of study (books, videos, DVDs etc)? Any suggestions for trips or events that would be relevant? Are there any local experts who could be invited to demonstrate skills or give occasional talks? How shall we inject plenty of variety into how we do things, so that the level of interest of members is maintained and the sessions remain enjoyable as well as rewarding?

Ideally as many group members as possible should participate in pre-preparation and in the sessions themselves and if people are nervous, this can easily be done in pairs or small groups.

Location. When discussing where to meet it might be useful to consider where the group members actually 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 all meet at a central point. The type of venue required may well depend upon the nature of the activity. The important thing is to reach group agreement about the location.

Transport. Giving lifts without obligation is useful. A standard agreed rate avoids embarrassment, so check if your U3A has a policy on this.

Communication. A “telephone tree” is a useful way to get messages to the group quickly. It can be useful to have one member of the group responsible for circulating news about the group in the newsletter and at the monthly meeting.

Once all of these and any other matters have been decided, inform the Interest 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.

Convener 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 convener continues to “lead” sessions.

Tutor 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 with expertise amongst them, join together and contact the Resource Centre to supply them with the non-book materials they need.

More suggestions can be found in *Time to learn*, which is available free of charge to U3As from the National Office.

The Group Leader’s Role

The term group leader, here, refers to all leadership models. In each group there will be one person who will take on the central role. It is one of the tenets of U3A that the group leaders are drawn from the membership and that group members must also be members of

U3A. The role of the group leader is to guide a group through a course of study in which they may, or may not, lead the learning. Most people prefer a democratic style of leadership; responsibility is shared with the group and people are expected to take an active part. Different subjects will make different demands on the group.

The group leader 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 feel disappointment that they had 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 find this disappointing and 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.

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 turn 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 turn to sum up what has been said.

Each member to say, briefly, what they have learned.

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, photomontage displays, 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.

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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.

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?

This material has come from U3As all over the country; our thanks to them and good luck to you.