u3a Guide

How to guide:
Building support for recruitment in your Committee

Introduction

If you are reading this guide, you won't need to be convinced of the need to recruit new members for your u3a. You may however be surprised and disappointed that other members of your committee don't instantly share your enthusiasm and commitment. Indeed, you may be feeling a bit isolated and disempowered. This guide is intended to help you build support for a recruitment project in your u3a, starting now.

If your u3a already has a lively and fully functioning recruitment team within or reporting to your committee you won't need this guide, although you might want to look at another guide in the toolkit: ***Developing a shared recruitment project with your members.***

Please keep a note of your suggestions for improvement and send them to feedback@u3a.org.uk

Defining the problem

There are all sorts of reasons why committees might not want to join the campaign to relaunch your u3a and/or recruit new u3a members, but they seem to boil down to 5 main categories:

1. Timing

2. Exhaustion and/or lack of people

3. Lack of confidence

4. Lack of know how

5. Complacency

This guide addresses each issue in turn and provides some suggestions for how to tackle them.

Timing

'This is the wrong time'. 'We can't do anything until we're back to normal'. 'When we can open our public meetings again, we can start recruiting'. We've all heard very committed and active people saying these things and, in the middle of a pandemic, it might seem a bit optimistic to be seeking new members. In fact, this is precisely the right time to think about *active recruitment*, *preparing to recruit* and *retaining existing members*.

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Some u3as are actively recruiting new members. They are using their website, online advertising and social media to promote their u3a and they have rejigged and extended their interest groups, general, and social meetings, to function online. Potential new members can use the internet to:

- find about the u3a offer
- enrol and pay their subscription
- receive a Welcome Pack
- join groups and social events and
- enjoy all the benefits of u3a membership.

These u3as are making a virtue out of necessity. There is a surge in people leaving full time employment because of covid. Many of them are looking for precisely the sort of learning and social opportunities offered by u3a and most of them are much more tech savvy than some of our current u3a members. As an example of what some u3as are doing right now, here's an example from Chepstow u3a:

> *In Chepstow we have a Facebook page. Here we advertise to the world. We post about things the Groups are doing on a regular basis. We try to put on a broad spread of groups, using one photo with a short caption, always driving people to go to the website and find out more. We encourage our members to share the posts onto their personal Facebook page. We repost onto local community pages. We also advertise our Tuesday Live talks. Existing members will already have received a link via Beacon. Interested non-members will post a comment like 'This looks good how do I come?' We then private message the link. We also advertise our coffee morning in this way. Non Members who come to the talk or coffee morning can then be contacted via the u3a Facebook page, again by private message with a welcome and a recruitment message, encouraging them to go to the website to find out more.*

If active recruitment seems impossible for your u3a, there is every reason to start *preparing to recruit.* What does preparing to recruit mean? For many u3as this will mean transforming their website into a shop window for visitors and potential new members, developing an irresistible offer of interest groups and social activities, improving their social media presence, turning their Facebook page into an effective means of promotion and recruitment, and developing the skills to do all these things. And I haven't even mentioned developing a recruitment plan! For a rough guide to the preparation for recruitment, there's a very simple checklist in the recruitment toolkit: ***Checklist: Preparing to recruit new members.***

The experience of 60 Pathfinder u3as who have been spearheading our national u3a recruitment campaign is that preparing to recruit can take quite a lot of time and energy, but that it can be very motivating and exciting for people who take part.

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There is a potential win-win here. Most of the things which you need to do by way of preparation to recruit will also help to invigorate your u3a and encourage existing members to become more involved and, naturally, to renew their membership!

Exhaustion/lack of people

Committee exhaustion and lack of people are really two sides of the same coin and constitute a major barrier to recruitment. Committee members may be exhausted by their efforts to inspire and maintain your u3a during these long months of pandemic. This may be compounding a long standing problem. Many mature and some relatively new u3as experience difficulty in recruiting committee members and this may well have become more difficult because of covid. For either or both reasons, your committee, and perhaps its most active and enthusiastic members, may feel that recruitment is going to be the straw that breaks their collective back.

The solution developed by many u3as is a mixture of appealing to the wider membership and adopting a team or shared approach to committee roles, to recruitment or to both. In East Suffolk u3a, for example:

> *We do face some challenges including attracting members to undertake Committee roles. We have resolved this problem by adopting a team approach in recent years. We have found that members are much more likely to volunteer for roles if they are shared roles or part of a team. So, for some Committee roles we have a team of 4 with one person as the Committee member which allows a sharing of workload but ensures the Committee has a member with responsibility for the role. In others, we have established an assistant model, which also has the benefit of developing individuals to take over the main role in due course. We have also found that at group leader and campus coordinator level the shared approach works extremely well.*

Ledbury and District u3a has a Membership Subgroup which has evolved to support existing members, grow the current offerings and explore recruitment via these offerings. This will include an increased engagement with technology - zoom, Facebook, website improvement etc. *To widen engagement and committee support, the subgroup includes a majority of non-committee member [my emphasis].*

Caterham u3a has chosen to have a relatively small committee of 8 members, but and have 'recruited helpers who are not committee members. We find that this involves many of our members in work and enables us to flourish without work becoming a burden. It also stimulates the development of new ideas.' Ware u3a has a Treasury Team of 3 members who look after, respectively, General, Groups and Open to All.

If all else fails, you could always try a novel approach to reach out to and seek help from your existing members. When Plymouth u3a found that it needed to recruit several new committee members, during a lockdown and at short notice, it created a video.

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> *As we were in lockdown it was impossible to make a plea to the membership personally (which we would have done in a general meeting). The only option was to engage the help of one of our committee (who belonged to the science and tech group) and also our Webmaster, to film a recording of myself (with my chairman's hat on) making a plea to the membership and telling people of our concerns, advising that we badly needed volunteers to step up and help. I am pleased to say this idea has received a lot of support - and resulted in some volunteers coming forward! (The video had over 1000 hits because many people seemed to watch it twice).*

There is one further aspect to the problem of exhaustion. Do committee members actually need to do themselves all the work they're actually doing? Some of the most energetic committee members are expending huge amounts of energy sustaining contact with members, particularly members who are not using email. Could this be done by other people? To return to Chepstow u3a:

> *As we prepared to go into lockdown in March, we discussed our concerns about those of our members who didn't have access to the internet, or who really didn't use the internet, and were living alone. Our Membership secretary went through Beacon and identified those members who we felt were at risk of isolation and loneliness. Volunteers on the committee then phoned people on a weekly basis, rotating the list amongst the volunteers.*

> *Most people on the list were very happy to chat to someone once a week, some were too busy in their gardens or with other projects, **some wanted to join the group of volunteers and chat to others on the list** [my emphasis].*

Lack of confidence

In the context of this guide, lack of confidence can arise for three main reasons: (a) a feeling that the situation is 'out of control' (b) a belief that there is 'nothing that we can do about it' or (c) negative experiences arising from previous failures.

The best way to address lack of confidence is simply to point to the manifest success of many u3as in addressing any and all of the retention and recruitment problems your u3a may need to address. Many of these may have existed before covid, but have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Any and every u3a will be able to access inspiring, interesting and persuasive examples of effective practice in any dimension of retention and recruitment. Sources of inspiration could include:

- lour local u3a network

- your regional trustee

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- *u3a national newsletter*
- u3a national website
- *Third Age Matters*
- Other guides and resources from the **u3a Recruitment Toolkit**

Just exchanging and sharing information and experiences with other u3as is probably the best single antidote to a lack of confidence. u3a Pathfinders have found that the sharing of ideas and experience is so very useful – not that they lacked confidence to begin with. This is what they have said about their participation in first phase of the recruitment campaign:

> *I found the various talks and slides really supportive.*

> *Many thanks for the brilliant encouragement and opportunities to pick up on ideas that Pathfinders have provided.*

> *So many good ideas have come forward through Pathfinders in the last few months*

Lack of Know How

Tasks always seem more daunting if you haven't done them before, particularly if they require new and unfamiliar skills. Recruiting new members can seem particularly challenging because it will invariably involve doing some new things or doing some old things differently. Covid has obviously highlighted issues around new technology. The decrease of under 65s as a proportion of the overall u3a membership also indicates that the preferred and most widespread model of recruitment – word of mouth – needs to be supplemented or changed .

There are a number of different ways for your u3a to acquire the know how it needs. In no particular order of priority, they include:

Canvassing your members. You will have many members who are regularly shopping on line and using social media. Indeed, when I canvassed my own u3a for help with video editing, I was amazed at the experience and knowledge of some of our members.

Approaching a neighbouring u3a or seeking assistance through your local u3a network or from an outside source. When Merton u3a couldn't find a member to help, they secured the assistance of another local charity to help them 'get a grip on Facebook'.

Accessing training and learning resources on line through the u3a national website or through the internet. It never ceases to amaze me how much is available through YouTube and the 'university' of Wikipedia.

To address the specific needs for technical support and know how, several u3as have set up technical teams which support interest group conveners, and committee and individual members of their u3a. In Exmouth u3a, for example,

> *Our committee set up a sub group; a new Technical Committee. This new committee starting investigating different systems and how we could help the*

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committee but importantly also our membership of about 1000 members. Over the course of the Lockdown and the easing of restrictions the Technical Committee has helped over 75 individual members with technical issues, mostly by phone call. This has meant that our members have been able to keep in touch and join in with our video conferencing meetings. The Technical Committee meets on a regular basis (all virtual of course! to test different systems and taking it in turns to write up our findings to send out to our membership).

Complacency

This is not a criticism or even an implied criticism of individual u3a members. Indeed, the problem should perhaps be defined as 'organisational middle age'.

'We're big enough as we are'. 'There's no need to change'. 'We're doing as well as can be expected'. 'We've already got waiting lists.' Well, we may not be hearing about waiting lists for a while, but all these sort of expressions seem to be associated with a loss of impetus and momentum which can occur as a u3a ages. In any case, there are three very cogent arguments against complacency: the need for new blood, the risk of failing to recruit the newly retired, and, the threat to long-term survival of your u3a.

On the positive side, there is almost universal agreement across the u3a movement that the benefits of attracting new members include:

- More members; more energy; more ideas; more enthusiasm for your U3A
- Engaging, enthusing and mobilising your current members
- More and better links with your local communities.

On the negative side, there is hard statistical evidence that overall the u3a membership is ageing and that we are becoming less attractive to the newly retired. The evidence can be found in the three large surveys of members conducted by the u3a over the last 20 years. In the first survey in 2001, 21% of members who took part in the survey were under 65. By 2019, when the survey was repeated for the third time, the proportion of members aged under 65 had dropped to 7%.

There is a lot of anecdotal evidence in addition that potential members in their 60s (including several of my own friends) have visited a u3a meeting once and inferred that they are 'not ready for the u3a' as it seems to comprise people who are a lot older than they are. From the u3a's own market research, a lot of people who are approaching retirement and who are favourably disposed to making new friends and learning new subjects and skills, are not attracted to organisations which they perceive as being for 'old people'. The evidence is set out in detail in another tool: ***Research on prospective new U3A members, A research report into barriers to attending U3A for those who are approaching retirement, without a degree.***

On the most negatives side, if your committee does not address these issues, your u3a could die. U3as can linger with a slowly decreasing membership over a number of years. Without new members, however, they will eventually find it impossible to carry on. This is

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not to say that this process is inevitable. Sometimes u3as have been pulled back from the brink, but this has involved much more decisive and radical action than would have been necessary, had recruitment issues been addressed earlier.

Conclusion

There are many reasons why your committee may not share your enthusiasm for a recruitment drive to attract new members. This guide identifies five of the major reasons for a possible lack of enthusiasm. Firmly based on the experience of other u3as, the guide suggests some ways in which you can build support and energy to recruit…….starting today!

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