

How to guide: Making your u3a offer irresistible

– let's talk about interest groups

Introduction

The purpose of the guide is to suggest how you can make your vital interest group offer irresistible to current and potential new members.

Success breeds success. New groups are vital to the growth of a u3a. Diversity will increase membership which will increase the pool of expertise to start more groups. Many members join for the social aspect of groups.... Waiting lists for groups are addressed and there are non-attendance rules. Arun East u3a

Your experiences of using this guide are of vital importance. **Please email suggestions for improvement to feedback@u3a.org.uk**

Getting your existing groups going

This is a delicate exercise of a number of your skills, including but not limited to persuasion, inspiration, technical support, and, negotiation. This section of the guide is inspired by the experience of one of the Nottingham u3as, so it has been tested in practice. Beeston u3a restarted over 50 of its 80 groups by June 2020. They used a mixture of:

- Encouragement to use Zoom
- Technical support and help sheets
- Trial zoom sessions
- Promotion of all active groups through the u3a newsletter and website.

In the words of Beeston u3a:

Our two group coordinators have been very active in contacting interest group facilitators to see if there's anything they can do to support them in continuing some activity. We've sent out information about using Zoom to help them.

Help sheets have been sent out to those who showed interest. Our coordinators did quite a bit of work by contacting group leaders personally and getting them started on Zoom by running trial sessions. It's finding a balance between pressurising and supporting.

Some group leaders haven't responded but many have and it's really good to see. I think the listing in our bulletin helped to show how many groups are active and this encouraged others. Obviously, it was also very encouraging to feature stories and reports from some of the groups meeting via zoom. Examples featured in the newsletter were family history, fresh flowers, knitting and crochet, patchwork and quilting, laughter exercise and chess.

We do what we can in trying times! Our older members will be the last ones to come out to meetings when we finally get the go ahead, and they are often the ones without

email as well! I posted something out to them about the AGM but I think U3As that set about telephoning people are doing a great job. We didn't expect this to go on so long!

A mini case study from Beeston U3A is attached at the end of the *How to guide*.

Hybrid interest groups

No, this isn't about gardening! Hybrid interest groups mix and match face to face meetings and/or individual activity with on line meetings. The concept has been developed for U3A by Liz Thackray. Her paper *Hybrid Groups* develops and explains the concept with a number of practical examples. Liz's paper can be found by opening this link [<https://www.u3a.org.uk/advice/hybrid-groups>].

There are a wide range of situations which will require different types of hybrid group. Your u3a will, we are sure, develop new and innovative hybrid interest groups to suit your members and your interest groups.

It is worth quoting from Liz's paper to explain the concept more fully:

In some situations this hybrid model might be as simple as a small group meeting with a laptop in the corner with others joining in the discussion/activity electronically. In other situations it might be something similar to a webcast with a live presentation being simultaneously streamed through Zoom, YouTube, or other means and possibly recorded for later consumption. Other options may apply to outdoor activities, music making, drama, sport, etc. The options will be determined by a number of factors including the nature of the activity, technical know-how of participants, willingness to experiment, etc. - and some activities are more challenging than others.

Examples of hybrid meetings would include:

- Committee meeting with some members in a socially distanced face to face meeting and joining others on Zoom projected on to a wall or perhaps cast to a tv screen
- Creating a Radical History group from scratch where members independently followed a FutureLearn course: Radical British History from Peterloo to the Suffragettes. The group met via zoom to share reactions, discuss and indeed critique the course. (*More on this type of hybrid group in the next section on Starting New Interest Groups.*)
- An opera appreciation group where members independently watch an agreed opera from a free streaming platform (eg Operavision) and meet fortnightly to discuss the opera and introduce the next opera using YouTube video clips.
- A creative writing group which meetings in a leisure centre but which shares and critiques members' work on line
- A French conversation class which meets on zoom. Between the fortnightly meetings, a member will email a vocabulary list on an agreed topic, or members agree to watch a clip from YouTube to discuss at the next zoom meeting.

- Virtual guided tours – the example given was a tour of the Wallace Collection. This can be done real time and also recorded for later viewing [example courtesy Liz Thackray]
- A Film group where members watch a film which has been selected at the previous meeting. Members watch the film independently on a free streaming platform (e.g. iPlayer or All4) and discuss the film at a follow up meeting. At the follow-up meeting they will also watch trailers for the films from which they will make their choice to watch before the next meeting (*more information below in section on Starting New Interest Groups*).
- A poetry group where one member cannot access the zoom meeting and where she is joined by a 'zoom buddy' who joins both of them to the meeting.

Starting new interest groups

This might seem a bit ambitious, but being forced to adapt to a Covid19 world has suggested all sorts of possibilities for new groups, without a large amount of extra work.

We are all experimenting with different approaches. There seem to be at least 4 main approaches at the moment which seek to take advantage of the opportunities of our pandemic world:

- Developing a new group on the basis of an existing group
- Sharing a group across two or more u3as
- Developing a new group using online resources
- Starting a new group to follow a FREE course that someone else has designed.

As an example of a new group for old, one u3a's Wine tasting group used to meet monthly in a community hall to taste between 6 and 10 wines. The hall has not reopened and instead of a tasting group, the u3a has opened a *Raise Your Glass* group which meets via Zoom. Members describe the single wine they are drinking and details of source, cost etc. The Zooms are themed and the convenor will show a couple of short videos on the theme of the meeting. Joke telling, conversation and a certain amount of hilarity ensue.

Given that the constraints of space, time and travel have been abolished on the internet, some u3as are sharing some or all of their online interest groups, which can of course be included in the offer of each u3a which has agreed to share.

Carlton and Gedling u3a never had a Film Group before Covid19. But with cinemas and theatres being closed, it started one. It meets twice a month to watch a film agreed at the previous meeting. To keep the programme interesting, film selection alternates: a classic film from the history of cinema in one meeting and in the next, a fairly recent or contemporary film. Films have been studied from a variety of free streaming platforms, notably iPlayer, All4 and YouTube. The advantage of these streaming platforms is that members don't all have to watch the film at the same time, the films are available to

anyone with a smart tv, internet connection or cable subscription....*AND THEY'RE FREE.* People study the film at their leisure in the two weeks between meetings.

The fourth approach is to create an interest group to follow a course or courses which have been designed and created by someone else. One of the best-known sources for courses is [FutureLearn](#). The [Open University](#) also offers a wide range of courses across different subjects.

It's extremely easy to create a new interest group to agree a course that members want to follow and exchange ideas and discuss the course via email, WhatsApp or Zoom.

The course developed by somebody else could form the basis for a whole new study group, which might be able to meet in the flesh or adopt a hybrid approach when the lockdown has eased or ended.

Using other people's content has all sorts of benefits. Notably, it:

- can create a shared and enjoyable learning experience
- widens the scope and range of interest groups and enriches your interest group offer
- gets over the problem of lacking sufficient expertise to start a new interest group
- takes the burden of preparation off the group convenor
- is potentially attractive to the newly and recently retired.

To expand on the last point, the u3a nationally recently commissioned a survey of 500 over- 55 year-olds, only a handful of whom were u3a members. Around half of the respondents said they were interested in learning new subjects and skills when they retired and had more time AND they had pretty good IT skills and said they would be looking for opportunities on line. [For more information about this survey](#), see the separate Market Research Report in the Toolkit.

Sharing interest groups with other u3as

Sharing interest groups across u3as may sound like one big hassle. Why should we bother? Well, there are many benefits from sharing interest groups:

- at a stroke it enriches and extends the interest group, both your own and that of each participating u3a
- it extends your offer particularly to the potentially and newly retired (and more internet-savvy) new members
- since the interest group is mainly or wholly on line, there is little or no implied cost in terms of time, effort or money
- it will reinforce and promote partnership links between u3as, particularly if you are geographically close

Many u3as have developed different models for sharing interest groups between different u3as. In Nottinghamshire, for example, there are a spectrum of arrangements from very informal to very formal.

At the informal end, an interest group in one u3a is advertised in another, often to boost small numbers.

At the formal end, the North Nottinghamshire Neighbourhood Network of u3as has a constitution and officers; member u3as allow and encourage members of other u3as in the Network to join their interest groups without charge. Somewhere in the middle of the spectrum there are u3as which have established bilateral arrangements between 2, 3 or 4 u3as, which allow members from one u3a to join an interest group in another.

*Where there are groups with vacancies there is a group sharing arrangement with other local U3As. This increases the opportunity for members. **Waltham Abbey u3a***

In an unexpected way, the arrival of social distancing has removed some of the barriers to sharing interest groups. If groups are meeting on line or operating hybrid arrangements, for example, there may no longer be a limit on group numbers imposed by venue size. After all, it doesn't really make much difference whether your Zoom meeting has 5, 15 or 25 members attending. You just need to have a slightly more formal structure and agreed ways of not all talking at once, as you get larger numbers.

Other barriers which have come tumbling down are time and space. Until now, the wider the geographical spread of membership of an interest group meeting face to face, the more distance members have had to travel to a meeting and the more time they have had to spend. Online, these barriers fall away.

Managing your truly irresistible interest group offer

You will need to have in place a willing, capable friendly team to support your Interest Group Co-ordinator..... or an extremely busy Coordinator because you are developing and adapting your whole interest group offer for Covidworld.

Get up close to your members and listen to what they want/would like. Consider sending a survey to all your members to find out who, what, when and how they may start new groups. Survey Monkey is free and easy to use. Develop a culture of having a go: if a group stops or doesn't take off then it's an opportunity to start another!

To recruit the newly-retired, the offering must appeal to them. They are looking for sport activities, dancing, mindfulness, Tai Chi, family history, and things to resume or new things to learn such as musical instruments, sewing/ craft skills and languages. Have a look at the market research in the toolkit. Check you have a good range of these on offer and try to fill gaps.

Check your website. If a prospective member googles, for example 'gardening' in your area, chances are Google will take them to your gardening group's page. Is it up to date? Is it attractive? Does it just say 'closed until further notice....' What is the message on your welcome page? What images are you using? Do they sell the benefits of your u3a to your

intended new members? See the separate How to guide in the toolkit: *Transforming your website*.

Waiting lists will have a strongly negative impact on potential new members, so actively set up parallel and complementary groups to eliminate them. For example, if Family History is full then try a “Writing your family history” group, or use FutureLearn courses on genealogy as a course lead for discussion in a Zoom meeting.

Have a handbook ready for a new group leader, plus an informed ‘helper’ if the prospective leader is new to u3a. Groups do not need an expert, a leader or a teacher. For more information about the many ways groups can work download a copy of [‘More time to learn’](#) from the National u3a office.

Finally, when you start recruitment, be ready to match up your new members to existing groups and have a robust plan ready for creating new groups for the age of Covid (e.g. online groups, a buddy system for those without access to suitable IT, venues suitable for socially distanced inside and outside meetings).

Good Luck

Frances Berry and Paul Martinez September 2020

Case Study: Beeston u3a: getting interest groups to reopen

Our two group coordinators have been very active in contacting interest group facilitators to see if there's anything they can do to support them in continuing some activity. We've sent out information about using Zoom to help them.

Help sheets have been sent out to those who showed interest. Anne and Kathy did quite a bit of work by contacting group leaders personally and getting them started on Zoom by running trial sessions. It's finding a balance between pressurising and supporting. Some group leaders haven't responded but many have and it's really good to see. I think the listing in our bulletin helped to show how many groups are active, and encouraged others. As at September 2020, there are 29 groups meeting on line and 27 groups meeting face to face either outside or in socially distanced venues. Obviously it was also very encouraging to feature stories and reports from some of the groups meeting via zoom.

Reports from online groups are given below to give a flavour of what we're doing.

American History

We were treated to an interesting talk on the History of the American Flag, with lots of visuals and videos to illustrate the talk. Zoom meetings has been working well for us, as long as we have speakers who can deal with the technology. It's not like being in a room together, with questions generally waiting until the end. But it's enabling us to continue with our interest in American History (and politics) and we are therefore continuing like this until the New Year. Next month, we will have another talk about previous contentious elections.

Online Coffee Morning

Beeston u3a's first online coffee morning took place last Thursday via Zoom. We were delighted that 16 members were able to drop in, and it was lovely to see so many friendly faces, that we hadn't been in touch with since March. It was a very informal session of general light-hearted chit-chat, and people who attended said that was the format they would like to see in the future.

Art History and Appreciation Group

Our theme for September is "Weather in Art". Members are researching and sharing pieces of art on this theme. So far, we have shared paintings by John Atkinson Grimshaw, Joseph Farquharson, Victor Gabriel Gilbert, Claude Monet, and Vincent Van Gogh. There are plenty of delights still to come. New members welcome- please contact me on groups@beestonu3a.org.uk to be added to the group list.

There is no pressure on new members to contribute when they first join- they can simply enjoy others' choices.

Some groups won't touch Zoom so it depends on a flexible approach from the leader. I run a play reading group and I haven't bothered trying due to the impossibility of all sharing a script to read, and of course the activity and games groups can't really do anything, so it very much depends on the nature of the interest group.

Our monthly open meetings are now taking place on Zoom where our Chair can make announcements and we have a guest speaker who can take questions at the end, either verbally or through the Chat facility on Zoom. We have a full programme of speakers up to June 2021 and we have capacity for up to 500 members to attend. Members are learning how to use Zoom so that more of them will be able to participate as time goes on.

We do what we can in trying times! Our older members will be the last ones to come out to meetings when we finally get the go ahead, and they are often the ones without email as well! I posted something out to them about the AGM but I think u3as that set about telephoning people are doing a great job. We didn't expect this to go on so long!"

Communications officer, Beeston u3a