

GROWTH MATTERS

Category: Growing your u3a

1 Purpose

To keep a u3a vibrant and to manage and facilitate growth

2. Scope

Relevant to all u3as.

3. Keeping a u3a vibrant

Over time the vibrancy and enthusiasm which were so much in evidence in the early days of a u3a can lessen. Things can start to feel a bit stale and new members may not be sufficiently aware of the ethos and self-help philosophy of the u3a movement. This can also have an impact on new members joining.

3.1 Warning signs

- The u3a becomes cliquy and doesn't feel welcoming to new members
- The u3a imposes a cap on the number of members
- A decline in renewals
- An ongoing decline in membership numbers
- A decrease in the number of new members
- Difficulty finding new committee members
- Existing committee members staying on for too long, sometimes in contravention of the terms of the constitution
- Conflict between committee members
- Complaints from members
- A lack of volunteers for Group Convenors/Leaders leading to waiting lists, a lack of new activities and some groups being too large

4. Managing growth

When a u3a becomes a full member of the Third Age Trust, it agrees to follow the principles of the u3a movement and agrees to encourage and assist, in every way possible, the formation of new u3as in neighbouring areas. Without growth, recruiting Group Convenors/Leaders and committee members becomes difficult and the u3a will struggle to thrive.

Many u3as rely on word of mouth for self-promotion and increasing membership. Turning potential members away either because 'the u3a is full' or simply because it is



unwelcoming can create bad publicity locally and put a brake on recruitment even if the u3a decides to open its doors again at a later date.

It is quite common for existing members of a u3a to be keen to cap the membership as they fear a larger u3a would become impersonal and they would lose the cosy, friendly atmosphere. Choosing not to limit membership has some important advantages including enhancing the number and range of interest groups on offer. It also means that there are more people to assist with the running of the u3a including taking on committee roles.

The growth and success of the u3a movement speaks volumes for its relevance and appeal to those no longer in full time work throughout the UK. It is part of the core ethos that the u3a experience be available to all those who would like to join and therefore waiting lists either for groups or membership should be kept to a minimum.

There is no one size fits all for a u3a. What works is dependent to a large extent on local circumstances, available facilities and the management and leadership from the committee. Ideally committees will embrace the opportunities for growth, monitor it and review their policies and practice accordingly.

4.1 Facilitating growth

4.1.1. Welcome new members

- Recruit new members on an ongoing basis.
- Undertake outreach sessions in the community to recruit new members.
- Hold open days - information about special event grants is available on the [u3a website](#).
- Have a group of 'meeters and greeters' to welcome new members to their first general meeting and check in with new members after a few weeks to see how they are getting on. This might be a phone call or speaking with them at a meeting.
- Hold new members' meetings to cultivate the self-help nature of u3a. These can be used to find out more about individuals, identify potential volunteers to take on key roles including committee members and provide an opportunity to ask for feedback.
- Introduce new members to other members and Group Convenors/Leaders.

4.1.2 Consider your interest groups

- Make sure that all the popular groups aren't 'full'. Start new groups for the activities that are popular so that more members can benefit. These might be at a different level or run in an alternative location.
- Work with the Groups' Coordinator to look at the way groups are organised. Could access to groups for new members be improved?
- Encourage groups of interested members to set up new groups for themselves.
- Ensure that Group Convenors/Leaders feel valued.

- Induct new Group Convenors/Leaders into their roles and provide them with a handbook for running the group. (There is a template handbook available on [the u3a website](#))
- Ask experienced members to mentor the establishment of new groups.
- Liaise with local u3as on the possibility of sharing groups. Each u3a involved should agree the policy and decide how the arrangement will work e.g. members may not pay a second subscription but pay any expenses of that group.

4.1.3. Review and maintain your committee

- Try to attract committee members who will bring fresh ideas.
- Make sure that the size of the committee is workable, the role of each member is clearly defined, and their workload is manageable. (Template role descriptions are available on the [u3a website](#)).
- Implement succession planning for new committee members.
- Spread responsibilities where appropriate, using sub-committees and working parties.
- Consider splitting tasks between committee members to share the load.
- Ensure that the committee runs efficiently with an agenda and minutes.
- Encourage a respectful and friendly culture.

4.1.4. Communicating

- Review how the u3a communicates with the membership – do you have a newsletter, how often is it sent out, and if you use social media, do all members know about it?
- Make new members aware of the ethos of the u3a movement in terms of people's contributions.
- Improve the topicality of your u3a website, keep it up to date and encourage members to use it.
- Keep the local community informed of what u3a membership can offer through the local press, magazines, radio, community television, free newsletters.
- Keep up to date publicity materials in doctors' & dentists' waiting rooms, estate agents, libraries, community centres, village halls etc. Resources can be accessed from the online [u3a Brand Centre](#).

4.1.5 Other

- Review your monthly meetings - could these be improved and are there ways you could increase engagement with the membership?
- Contact your Regional Trustee or your local Network for support and ideas.
- If you have members who don't renew their membership, see if you can find out why.



4.2 Splitting the u3a

If your u3a has a large number of members and there are challenges to managing this, such as the capacity of your monthly meeting venue, one option might be to set up monthly meetings either in an alternative location, or hosting monthly meetings, groups and events at other satellite locations. This can be done where one committee oversees all activity of the u3a, with meetings, events and groups operating in satellite locations. This set up can avoid the challenge of opening a new u3a which would require a new committee to be formed and will likely encourage new members to join who may be interested in taking on the responsibility for a new group, helping to organise monthly meetings and or events.

4.3 Starting a new u3a

If, despite all efforts, it is impossible to satisfy the continuing demand for new membership in an area, and alternative structures do not provide a suitable alternative, a new u3a may be needed. Please contact u3a Office or the Regional Trustee so this can be discussed in more detail.

5. Common concerns and responses to increasing membership numbers

5.1 Concern - The room used for the general meetings will be too small and not all members will be able to attend

Assuming that moving the venue is not an option, the first step to take is to analyse what percentage of the membership regularly attend general meetings. This may then give scope to take new members without moving to an alternative venue.

- Hold a second general meeting. Some u3as do two in a day or two in a month.
- Have two sittings per meeting.
- Run hybrid meetings where members can join online as well as in person (for support on setting this up, have a look at [the Let's Talk Tech website](#))
- Some successful, long standing u3as do not have monthly meetings.
- If the main purpose of general meetings is communication and togetherness, think about introducing additional events which will achieve the same objective e.g. 'drop in' coffee mornings, 'meet the members' sessions etc.
- If the main attraction of general meetings is the speaker, try having more specialised topics which may attract different members at different times.
- Constantly review local facilities and ask members to suggest alternative venues.

5.2 Concern - New members will take longer to feel part of the u3a

- Start having new members' meetings and coffee mornings.
- Initiate a meet and greet system and a buddy system.

- Follow up with new members who are not attending to see if they are happy to re-engage.

5.3 Concern - Growth will put too much strain on the committee

The size of the membership need not have a significant effect on committee workload:

- Having first checked the constitution, consider co-opting more people with specific skills onto the committee, until the next AGM.
- Discuss whether an amendment to the constitution is required to increase the maximum size of the committee.
- Discuss whether the workload could be distributed more equitably.
- Consider sharing the workload. Could some of the tasks be broken down e.g. Treasurer or Secretary. You could also have vice positions for roles, or small teams to cover areas of responsibility. This will also help with contingency and the sustainability of your committee.
- Delegate certain responsibilities to sub-committees, each with a Trustee as a member. These committees can then report to the main committee and can help to devolve the workload.
- Speak to other u3as either individually or at a network meeting and find out how they manage.

5.4 Concern - The interest groups are full and if they get bigger they will be forced out of members' homes into unsuitable and impersonal outside venues and will lose their togetherness

- Stress that the opposite can happen – a large number of small groups can exist and be welcoming to new members.
- There are outside venues which will accommodate increased numbers without becoming impersonal and even the largest room can be made to work if the layout is right.
- Many members prefer to use neutral venues and do not want to go to individual's homes. A mixture of group sizes and dynamics is good.
- The best solution for groups such as language or discussion groups where size is limited by group dynamics is to set up additional groups. Many larger u3as start a new beginners group in major languages every few years as existing groups want to stay together. This process can be extended to other subjects, particularly where knowledge builds up and joining an existing group would be difficult.
- If the venues are limiting the potential numbers, investigate alternative meeting places with a larger capacity.

5.5 Concern - The u3a are happy to increase membership but people will not start new groups

- Encourage the formation of interest groups where many members share the load.

- Ask Group Convenors/Leaders to try to identify potential additional conveners.
- Investigate if some of the conveners would organise “back to back” or parallel sessions.
- Investigate if a neighbouring u3a can offer any help e.g. if they have spaces in some of their groups, they may be happy to have some members of another u3a attending.
- Ensure that plenty of guidance and support to Group Convenors/Leaders is given and make sure new Group Convenors/Leaders are aware that if they did take the plunge they would not be on their own.
- Arrange a regular ‘get together’ to share ideas and discuss problems.
- Arrange general meetings where Group Convenors/Leaders can discuss their personal experiences with the members, which might remove some of the worries and concerns and inspire some to volunteer.
- Take all opportunities to stress the significance of the contribution of Group Conveners and make sure they know how much they are valued e.g. organise a get-together to discuss ideas and include a lunch to thank them.
- Ensure that the committee supports the Groups Coordinators to fulfil their role. The Coordinator should be providing support to all Group Convenors/Leaders and sourcing new talent, with a view to easing the pressure on existing groups.
- Consider other group dynamics such as online based groups (e.g. [MOOCs](#), [YouTube](#), [Future Learn](#), [au3aonline.org.au](#), [TED talks](#) and the Open University's [OpenLearn](#) as providers of a range of support materials).
- Find out whether people are deterred from volunteering as a Group Convenors/Leaders because they do not want to use their homes as a venue for a group. Many u3as have hardly any home groups and work excellently. A group could consider taking it in turns to host the group in their house.
- Canvas new members interests and discuss with them how they might use these as a basis for new groups.
- Stress the u3a ethos – this is peer to peer learning and Group Convenors/Leaders do not need to be experts or to teach in a “classroom” style.
- Discuss the concerns about a lack of Group Convenors/Leaders with members, with neighbouring u3as and at network meetings.

Related documentation

- [Principles of the u3a Movement](#)
- Member Code of Conduct
- Group Convenors Handbook
- Interest Groups Matter
- [Grants](#)
- Communications
- Recruiting and Valuing Volunteers
- u3a Health Check



- [Recruitment and Retention Toolkit](#)
- Recruitment and Retention Toolkit Overview

Where the document isn't hyperlinked above, it can be access on the advice page of the u3a website: www.u3a.org.uk/advice

Support, Advice and Information

The u3a run a number of online workshops to support all Trustees, including 'Growth Matters' which covers the information in this document and more. The workshop 'Contingency planning' also explores some of the information covered here in more detail. The workshops also provide an opportunity to meet other u3a members from across the country. More information about other workshop topics and how to book can be found on the [u3a workshops page](#).

All members can also contact the u3a office for information and advice by calling 020 8466 6139 or emailing: u3a.office@u3a.org.uk.

u3a Growth Matters		
Version	Description of changes	Date
2.0	Updated formatting	18/11/2021
3.0	Updated information and links, edited for clarity.	16/03/2023