

Planning for the U3A movement Post Lockdown

Background

There has been a very positive response to my request, in TAM and the monthly national Newsletter, for members' thoughts on where the U3A movement will be once COVID-19 is a matter of historic record. Suggestions were thoughtful, wide ranging and to the point – just what I would expect from a movement that has such a depth of experience and knowledge.

Many of these suggestions are included in this report - respondents may recognise some of their words in the text below - plus some of my own.

The lockdown has certainly shown how some U3As have adapted to unforeseen circumstances of an unprecedented magnitude. Although technology has been vital in keeping members in touch during lockdown, it cannot fully replace the social interaction which is central to all U3A activities.

As lockdown measures ease, but without a date for a vaccine, there is a period between now, and possibly early 2021, for U3As to plan for the "new normal". It is important that current members see plans for the movement post COVID and feel that they are included in that future. This is also true of potential new members entering the third age and who represent the future life blood of the movement.

COVID 19 will force change on many parts of society. By reacting and adapting positively, we owe it to future generations of third agers to make sure that this does not happen to U3A.

General Observations

In starting to plan for life after COVID, members have made the following general points: -

- a) How have U3A members been dealing with COVID-19? Anecdotal evidence suggests that they:-
 - are less likely to have been concerned at the prospect of lockdown than the population in general and are more likely to have been respecting social distancing guidelines;
 - have appreciated hearing from their U3As about lockdown activities;
 - do not expect life to return to normal in the foreseeable future and are more likely to be concerned for their wellbeing than the wider population;

- have differing opinions about when is the right time to end lockdown and are unsure about when to re-join U3A activities;
 - will wait for government advice before ending lockdown and some will wait until a vaccine is available. All will wait until the Trust advises that insurance of activities is covered by the its Public Liability Insurance policy;
 - may return to outdoor activities earlier, where there is more opportunity to maintain social distancing, but will be more selective about indoor activities whilst social distancing remains in place;
 - will wear face coverings depending on the circumstances; those with hearing issues may have additional problems if others are wearing face masks.
- b) The 2019 Membership [survey](#) showed that the movement is ageing – the average age has increased from 72 in 2009 to 74 in 2019. Members are getting older and are at greater risk from the pandemic.

(More specifically, our membership surveys show that the percentage of under 65's declines from 21% in 2001 to 18% in 2009 and 8% in 2019; similar figures for the under 70's are respectively 45%, 39% and 28%).

- c) Will the organisation lose a disproportionate number of its older members? If so, in order to regenerate itself, U3As will need to become more attractive to the recently retired and, possibly, those in their 50's and 60's who are made redundant and face limited prospect of continued full time employment?
- d) It is impossible, currently, to follow social distancing guidelines within indoor interest groups. Groups are using video conferencing to find creative ways around lockdown and social distancing. Some are resorting to email correspondence whilst others are pausing activity until the group starts again. This situation raises the issue of the digital divide that will exist within a U3A and the increased sense of isolation for some members. It should not be assumed that, even those members that do have access to the internet, are proficient in areas such as video conferencing and social media.
- e) Addressing this technology deficit could add immeasurably to the life skills and enhanced participation of many older members who risk becoming isolated and 'left behind' by a world increasingly available only online. Local co-ordinators could identify members in this category and then provide suitable support/training with the aim of getting each member to the point where they can receive and send emails, as a minimum.
- f) If the movement is to keep its relevance and vitality for members, current and future, the principle of **Lifelong Learning** needs to be promoted as the aim of the organisation. Acceptance of this principle implies encouraging the uptake of new technologies e.g. video conferencing, virtual meetings, on-line forums etc,

as a natural evolution of the movement. However, whilst U3As are catering for a new demographic they will still need to remain attractive to their older members.

- g) Loneliness and isolation, and its effects on third agers, were high on the Trust's agenda before the pandemic. There may never have been a time when becoming older and more vulnerable has had such attention in the public consciousness - thereby providing an opportunity for U3As and the Trust to raise the movement's local and national profile.
- h) As the lockdown eases, U3As should consider recruiting new members, because they will be their future lifeblood. If there is a surge in full-time and partial unemployment, because of the economic shock of the pandemic, there could be a significant pool of potential new members, over and above the number in more normal times, who are in their 50s and 60s.

How can U3As attract new members and retain existing ones - a post Covid19 Relaunch Plan?

Many U3As are making substantial efforts to keep active and remain open during lockdown. Fascinating initiatives have already been illustrated in areas including Third Age Matters, the monthly National Newsletter, the U3A Facebook page. Below is a summary of these initiatives: -

- a) Assess the impact of Covid19 by carrying out a SWOT (strengths / weaknesses / opportunities / threats) analysis for post lockdown based on criteria such as - what have been the most successful activities during lockdown; how have those without access to IT been helped; have new partnerships been made with local organisations; are there any activities that may have to be dropped (e.g. large monthly meetings), are there new activities that will emerge (e.g. digital based); should there be a proactive approach to local community projects (environmental, cultural, historical, research, exhibitions, public consultations, publications, etc); how can newsletter, email contacts, blogs etc be made more engaging; what are the key issues that need to be addressed in the near future?

Based on the results the committee produces a draft relaunch plan, including a publicity campaign and a timetable to be discussed with interest group leaders, including their ability/willingness to restart their groups. Arrange for venues to be checked and if necessary, alternatives found. Communicate the agreed relaunch plan to all our members.

- b) Offer membership for the first year at a discounted rate. Some U3As are encouraging membership renewal at a reduced fee, or postponing renewal for, say, 3 months, or renewing as normal but for a 15-month period.

- c) Advertising and promoting U3A to external sources of members for example - Age Concern, village / town council meetings, parish magazines, religious bodies / supermarket notice boards, retirement homes, local shops, public libraries, hospitals, local bowling clubs, British Legion, local museums.
- d) In addition to the current channels of communication - newsletters, leaflets, TAM, etc – consider using social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc) to reach out to younger potential members. Put some interest group meetings on YouTube?
- e) Use new external publicity channels - the Trust provides grants to help fund Open Days for example.
- f) Book space in community venues / libraries, etc to show case examples of the work of interest groups – such as art, creative writing.
- g) Approach employers and companies offering pre-retirement / redundancy programmes.
- h) Attract late 50 / early 60 year olds, made redundant by COVID, and suggest that they set up interest groups in their area of expertise.
- i) Developing new ways to welcome, induct, support and enlist the enthusiasm of new members
- j) If members do not have access to the internet, set up a “buddy system”. Those with IT access can share, with those without, by for example, passing on information and delivering a hard copy of the newsletter
- k) Reviewing the “U3A offer”, especially the range of interest groups, by supporting and encouraging them to consider different ways of meeting and communicating including online learning material, language groups linking virtually with third age groups in the countries whose language they are studying. Consider “blended / hybrid” meetings where, say, six members meet physically and the others, for various reasons, opt to attend virtually.
- l) Developing new activities and processes adapted to social distancing
- m) Approach universities / libraries, etc who may have large spaces that would allow interest groups to meet with social distancing.

What can the Trust do to assist U3As?

- a) Put the Trust’s regular workshops online. In addition, provide training materials, tips and suggestions, case studies, videos, bite size workshops, more advice on marketing and communications.
- b) Continue to collect, collate and share with the movement the successful and innovative lockdown experiences of U3As.

- c) Research, and then share with U3As, the experience of other organisations with aims similar to our own.
- d) Devote the November issue of TAM to sharing creative ideas provided by U3As and their interest groups. Invitations to participate could be advertised in the September issue.
- e) Develop further the Trust's Facebook page 'Keeping in Touch' which has been a big success since lockdown. The interchange between members across the country has been very revealing although it has highlighted, in some cases, a lack of knowledge of the U3A structure. Previously there has been little member to member contact that has allowed a national U3A conversation.
- f) Continue providing member driven on-line material such as regular guest lectures, learning courses, competitions. Make some lectures more widely available, say on YouTube, so that they reach a wider audience.
- g) Develop its current virtual offerings so that a wider geographical and diverse sector benefits from the U3A offer.
- h) The Trust is recognised as a body that encourages learning into the third age. It may not have the structure and resources to deliver learning on the scale required but it can be the catalyst for new ways of learning in retirement for some for the 10 million people in this category.

Conclusions

Following my request for post lockdown thoughts on the future of the movement, there are many differing views, but the above analysis tries to capture the variety of ideas being generated from within the movement.

Not all members will agree with the ideas suggested. This is not to be expected given the wide range of experiences within the movement. Hopefully some will find favour and assist particularly committees to plan for how their U3A approaches post lockdown with a positive message to their membership and their wider community.

In the final analysis, it will be for individual U3As to decide the best approach post lockdown, but I hope that this paper has provided some useful advice. The staff and resources of National Office are available to support and advise U3As if they wish to develop the suggestions highlighted in this paper. If you wish to access these resources, please contact ian.mccannah@u3a.org.uk

I am sure that a united endeavour, between U3As and the Trust, will ensure that the movement emerges from lockdown with plans to face an uncertain future with confidence.

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