



Report from the U3A National Conference held at The East Midlands Conference Centre, Nottingham 23 – 25 August 2016

Attended from Chalfonts U3A by:

David Burbidge (Chairman)

Val Smith (Secretary)

Valerie Darbyshire (Membership Secretary)

The Conference is an annual event organised by the National Office of the Third Age Trust and was attended this year by 500 U3A members. Its purpose is to update members on the progress of U3A, its plans for the future and give the opportunity for attendees to network with other U3As throughout the UK.

There are **1,000 U3As in the UK.**

Total U3A membership in UK = 400,000

Penetration factor: Given as number of U3A members per 100 people aged 65 and over

South East = 5.1

East = 5.1

Scotland = 0.8

Nationally this equates to 3.1

Growth of membership to U3As – 22,000 per annum with no sign of slowing down. Membership anticipated to be 500,000 within 5 years.

The Conference put on 8 U3A presentations

1. Making the best use of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) (Attended by DB)
2. Managing your U3A (Attended by VS)
3. Managing Growth
4. Give and take a hand – U3A+
5. Getting your message across
6. Telling your life stories
7. Maintaining a vibrant U3A (attended by VS)
8. Getting involved in U3A research (attended by DB)

plus a series of drop-in sessions.

DB/VS/VD all attended the drop in session relating to the **Beacon Management** system

In addition there were two outside excellent speakers, both prominent in their field

- 1) Nick Hawes from Birmingham University who spoke about Robotics and AI (artificial intelligence)
- 2) Dr Victoria Williamson from Sheffield University who discussed the history of music in human development, its influence on people's health and the progress music is making in medicine.

Samantha Mauger has taken over from Lin Jonas as Chief Executive Officer of the Third Age Trust and will commence her post from the 1 September 2016. Her previous job was with Age UK London.

GENERAL

It was fascinating talking to people from other U3A's and hearing how they are run. The general impression is that Chalfonts U3A is doing very well. Valerie took a couple of copies of our newsletter which was well regarded. The main point being its format which allows for up to date information compared with the more expensive quarterly booklet type newsletters produced by some U3As. One U3A produces a 60 page newsletter every month which is printed and circulated to all their members. This of course has significant cost implications.

One interesting point that arose was that many U3A's have a **science group**. We have already addressed this and via the September 2016 newsletter have asked that members interested in this subject email our Groups Co-ordinator. Our members' list has shown that we have several members interested in Science and we are sure that there will be sufficient members who could contribute to such a group

On the last afternoon there was a discussion headed "**The Future**". It was about whether the structure of the National Office in its present form is the best way to provide the services required by the members and their U3A's. It was a wide ranging and sometimes heated discussion. It was enlightening and David Burbidge, as Chairman of Chalfonts U3A will be putting forward his own views. If you are interested details of the points presented will appear on the National website and comment will be invited.

Pam Jones, Chairman of the U3A, was as usual very kind to us and invited us to sit on her table on the last evening where we had interesting conversations with the other guests including Samantha Mauger the new CEO.

PRESENTATION REPORTS

Presentation: Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) (attended by Dave Burbidge)

This was an excellent presentation on MOOCs that explained how they came into being and their tremendous value as an educational tool and how they could be used by U3A groups and individual members.

We are not sure how many groups or members, if any, in our U3A are using them so as a first step we will try to find out via the newsletter if they are being used. If they are being used then a meeting will be arranged of all those involved to see how we can extend their use. If they are not being taken up we shall carry out further research and take steps to encourage their use.

MOOCs advice website <http://u3asites.org.uk/advice-on-moocs/home>

Presentation: Getting Involved in U3A Research (attended by Dave Burbidge)

This was another very good session. The aim of the session was to promote research which was one of the original aims of the U3A movement that has largely been neglected. The team involved are producing a booklet "*Getting Involved in Research*" which will be published shortly (David Burbidge has draft copy if anyone would like to see it). The booklet describes how U3A's throughout the country are carrying out research projects often linked and run in conjunction with local universities but it need not be that complicated.

Given below are the **four** areas of research which it suggests could be undertaken by U3A's.

1) Shared Learning Projects

These are the most common form of research where a U3A works with outside organisation such as a University, Museum, library or other social groups to carry out a specific project usually lasting about 12 weeks. U3A's can also join with one another to carry out a piece of research.

2) Interest Group Research

This is where a group in a U3A chooses to investigate something of particular interest to the group. The local history group might for example investigate what life was like living in Chalfont St Peter in the First World War. A walking group could study Chalk streams with particular attention to the Misbourne.

3) Research on U3A:Market research

This research can be local or national. We could for example "identify barriers to U3A membership and one for VAL S identify the most suitable messages and communication methods.

4) External Research (U3A members as research assistants/collaborators

This is more complex and involves working with Local Universities and similar bodies developing beneficial relationships and prime areas for research. It goes beyond simply acting as research subjects. Members are involved in planning, collecting information, data processing, analysing results etc.

Details of past and present research are given on the National Research Database (<http://u3aresearch.org.uk>)

Presentation: Managing your U3A (attended by Val Smith)

Objectives:

- To reinforce the common bond, support and obligations, that all U3As share in being members of the Third Age Trust
- To familiarise ourselves with the essential documents that structure a U3A and to share solutions regarding the issues that these documents can provoke
- To provide participants with the opportunity to network with other U3As and to stimulate discussion about the importance of effective and enjoyable management of U3As.

The presentation enabled all delegates the opportunity to confirm a common bond of understanding with regard to the management of a U3A. The **CONSTITUTION** is central to all U3A's administration and delegates were able to take part in an activity that interrogated the implications of the model constitution. Delegates had the opportunity to share ideas and confront the issues on this topic.

The ethos of the U3A must underpin all that we do. With interest groups as our core activity, the presentation explored ways in which the ethos can be reinforced through effective support of our interest groups and those that run them good communication and effective committee strategies.

The presentation took into account the voluntary nature of U3A committees and stressed that sharing the workload is crucial, but that encouraging volunteers can be daunting. Good practice from other U3As was incorporated.

From attending this presentation it is re-assuring to confirm that Chalfonts U3A is adhering to all policies and progressing the growth of the group in the recommended manner.

Presentation: Maintaining a Vibrant U3A (attended by Val Smith)

Vibrancy was identified as an essential to sustaining a base of volunteers continuing to contribute their time and talents to their U3A. Consistent with the U3A ethos of learning from each other a number of cameos were presented to illustrate vibrancy in a variety of contexts, to address encouraging interest groups, encouraging new members and encouraging volunteers. These included:

- Starting and reviving interest groups
- Positioning interest groups to address diverse learning types, generating a rich picture for members and having fun
- Creative use of a welcome message to support vibrancy
- Ideas for introducing new U3A members to communicate a culture of vibrancy
- Examples of introducing more vibrancy to various roles which members undertake
- The attraction of Shared Learning Projects as a source of pathways to vibrancy
- Embedding vibrancy in communications

The presentation highlighted the U3A ethos that “Groups are run BY the members FOR the members” and that groups rely on members participating and contributing.

Methods that were suggested:

- Produce a Welcome Pack for new members
- Instigate New Members’ Welcome meetings
- Mini presentation: Use the monthly meetings for interest groups to demonstrate what they can offer eg: displays
- Combine an activity/activities for interest group eg: Wine appreciation/French – a combined event – French wines/French conversation
- Create a “Really Useful Group” – RUGS to help the group and the committee with for example: tea/coffee making, setting up chairs at monthly meetings, greeting members etc. One U3A was quoted as having over 100 members in such a group.
- Ensure that there is a full accessibility policy for the benefit of members with disabilities
- Ensure that the committee visit interest groups to identify any problems
- Review all aspects of the regular speaker meetings and list potential improvements which can support the claim to be a vibrant U3A

The committee will be looking at these methods and take action, or have taken action already where appropriate.

Give and take a hand - U3A+ (attended by Val Darbyshire)

This was a very educational and useful session on ensuring that U3A members can enjoy the activities we have to offer for as long as possible. A lot of detail covered and I left feeling that at Chalfonts U3A we had not even begun to scratch the surface in helping many of our members and potential members to access our activities.

One excellent suggestion made at the presentation is that we appoint an Accessibility Officer. This person (possibly backed by a small team of assistants) would be the first point of contact for anyone needing more help, and would be aware of likely issues and all the ways we can offer help when needed. Such help is likely to be different for every individual.

We also need to put in place a policy on access for those in need of help, and those who may carers.

This was a very worthwhile and inspiring afternoon. There is a variety of help available from national U3A office, and other national concerns and there are several volunteer-lead projects, including U3A+, in which we can participate.

I found that many U3As have a Really Useful Group and this seems to work very well. This RUG can be formed from people who do meeting and greeting, teas, chair putter-outers and putter-awayers, events helpers, equipment and IT people, cloakroom attendants, manning information tables or checking the notice boards, etc.

It was also suggested that rather than a Rug (*which is stepped on*) these people are actually a Magic Carpet, working with the U3A ethos of self-help to make events useful and efficient.

The Beacon On-line Management System (attend by Dave Burbidge, Val Darbyshire and Val Smith)

We were given a demonstration on The Beacon on-line computer software programme which has been designed, by U3A volunteers, for U3As to manage membership, group organisation, and financial transactions online.

It is clear that this system has many benefits in time, accuracy, and efficiency, and has already been adopted by some U3As who are finding the membership facility particularly beneficial.

The work of migrating to Beacon will take some time and involve changing the way some things are recorded but it is hoped that everyone will see the benefits in due course.