

# Report of a One Day Conference of NW Region U3As held at St Cuthberts' s Centre, Preston on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2010

**Present:** Robin Ackland, Penrith; Neil Adams, Grange; Jose Anderson, NWREC; Sam Bevan, Bolton; Elizabeth Blamires, Aughton & Ormskirk; Eleanor Bowden, Meols; Grant Bramwell, NWREC; Alan Brookman, Clitheroe; Jenny Carley, Chester; Trevor Cheetham, NWREC; Colin Crumpton, Alsager; Mrs Crumpton, Alsager; Pauline Dale, Sale; Ann Davis, Chester; Cath Denton, Chorley; John Dolan, Carlisle; Carol Dutchman-Smith, Preston; John Ellison, NWREC; Pauline Fielding, Lancaster & Morecambe; Anne Fogg, Blackpool; Thelma Goodman, Lancaster & Morecambe; Marie Gornall, Mawdesley; Jane Gudgeon, Burscough; John Harman, Lancaster & Morecambe; Ann Haskell, Aughton & Ormskirk; Barbara Heywood, Ambleside; Diane Hill, Furness; Barbara Houghton, Chorley; Bill Howarth, Maghull & Lydiat; Helen M. Jackson, Ambleside; Peter Jackson, Ambleside; Geoff Jeavons, Bolton; Lin Jonas, TAT; Ann Kay, Clitheroe; Michael Kedzlie, Meols; Lesley Knaggs, Lancaster & Morecambe; Alex McMinn, Aughton & Ormskirk (part of meeting); Kathleen Mercier, NWREC; Valerie Miles, Blackburn; Elizabeth Newell, Formby; Chrystal Orme, Burscough; Derek Pluck, Preston; Harold Potts, Chorley; Jean Povall, Mawdesley; Janet Reddy, Neston; Mary-Ann Renton, NWREC; Jeff Roberts, Aughton & Ormskirk; Trevor Roberts, Cockermouth; Gill Russel, Hoyle; Ian Searle, TAT; Meg Shaw, NWREC; Sally Shears, Lancaster & Morecambe; Geoff Simons, Wirral; Colin Smith, Mawdesley; Jan Smith, South Lakes; Tony Snape, Magull & Lydiat; David Starling, NWREC; Neil Stevenson, UpHolland; Tom Thompson, South Lakes; Muriel Whitaker, Preston; David Wilcock, Carlisle; Ray Wilde, Wallasey; Rod Wilshaw, Burnley & District; John Wright, Lancaster & Morecambe; Sheila Young, Chester. (65)

Apologies and messages of goodwill were received from several other U3As including Ashton in Makerfield, Bebbington, Bramhall, Heswall, Halewood, Huyton, Lytham St Annes, and Salford and from a few individuals who had withdrawn at the last moment. The car bringing people from Marple Bridge and Mellor U3A was clipped by a lorry on the motorway en route to the meeting. This did serious damage to the car but, thankfully, only minor damage to its occupants and we all wish Ann Eade and Eva Wilkie a speedy recovery.

Kathleen Mercier (Chair NW Region of U3As) opened the Meeting by welcoming everybody to the meeting. She said that the NW Regional Committee have arranged this one day conference to give U3A members in the NW an opportunity to come together to meet the National Chairman, Ian Searle and the TAT Company Secretary, Lin Jonas and to discuss topics of interest around local U3As, Networks, Regions and the Third Age Trust.

The NW Region was formed as a result of the EGM in Birmingham in 2008. A meeting was held at the end of April 2009 when a Constitution was agreed and a Regional Committee formed to assist the NW Trustee in taking the Region forward. Since then the Committee have been active in working on your behalf to give the region a voice and offer further opportunities to all members. As well as today's conference we have very soon a Culture revisited day in Liverpool on 16<sup>th</sup> March, our 3 day residential School at Myerscough College from 7<sup>th</sup> - 10<sup>th</sup> April - for which there are a few places still available, and the AGM in Manchester on 25<sup>th</sup> May following a lecture by Dr John Prag who is renowned for his work on reconstructing ancient faces from skeletal remains.

Alex McMinn had decided to step down early a few months early as NW Trustee and she wished him well as Chairman of the National Research Committee. We hope to have an interim Trustee on the NEC soon to maintain the voice of the NW there and to keep us informed of the latest news from TAT. It will be necessary for the NW members to elect a replacement for a three year term from September.

Today we are delighted to have Ian Searle with us to tell us about his aspirations for his term of office which began with his election in September at the Annual Conference. Ian is a member of Carrick U3A, has served as a Trustee and Vice Chairman on the NEC prior to his election. Lin is the Company Secretary of TAT and manages the office in Bromley - she is the fount of all knowledge and will talk to us about the resources available to all U3A groups.

Ian Searle said that since the first U3As and the Third Age Trust were set up in the UK, they and society have changed. The U3A movement has expanded a great deal, as of today there are 750 U3As. We must acknowledge that U3As succeed because they are what they are; they depend on fellowship as well as on learning and both elements are of value in contributing to the well-being of individuals. Within such a widespread movement there are huge variations of interest from those wanting to associate to follow humble pastimes to those who wish to pursue academic research at the highest levels. We must accommodate both and the great majority who are inbetween.

Such accommodation must not be allowed to change the fundamental nature of the U3A or unduly affect its sense of fellowship. We must remain a broad church. The recent revival of the Education and Development committee of TAT is designed among other things to further collaboration and develop teams to help U3As.

Clearly the Third Age Trust can provide some services centrally which would otherwise either not be available or available at far greater cost. For example creating National awareness of the movement and propagating our ideals. Thus this central organisation is the natural way of producing booklets such as the recently produced 'This is U3A' and 'Time to Learn'. They also can interact most appropriately with the National Press and many other National bodies. They can also act as banker to give loans for payment of deposits for Residential Schools and the like. Lin will discuss later this morning all the services that National Office can provide for the movement and individuals such as insurance, advice re charitable status, publicity material both with regard to the birth of new U3As and recruitment to existing ones.

The regional structure of U3A was fundamentally altered at the EGM in May 2008. The Regions have developed up to now at different speeds and along different paths. The NW has developed particularly rapidly. Both East Midlands and the NE had existing structures which they are having to modify. Some 'regions' such as Wales are against any formal regional structure. The SE have a vast number of U3As in a circular belt running all the way round outside the London Region and have their own difficulties.

Conferences and summer schools exemplify the desire for co-operation which is central to the values of the U3A movement. The desire to share ideas and experience, on which even the smallest informal learning group is based, is fundamental to the wish to meet other U3As, often in local networks or regions but also at a UK level. It is this almost instinctive desire to meet and learn from others that will continue to drive the co-operation between us all.

The Movement is at a crossroads and to explore the best way forward TAT has initiated a review process. Up to now 5 papers have been commissioned including one by Meg Shaw on how we can move forward on various scenarios. These papers will be considered for the first time at Away Days planned for early March at which the NEC and past chairs and some others will be present. We have to remember that the UK U3A model is a unique system. It is bipartite in form, that is, alongside the many individual U3As which have been created, there has always been a central organisation, or hub, which we know as the Third Age Trust. This adds strength to the movement as a whole but can also allow problems to develop. The fact that the U3As which are the members of the Trust are 'operationally independent' bodies, not subject to regulation or governance by the Trust, is a perennial source of both strength and difficulty but must be inviolate. The Third Age Trust is financially dependent on its members, the U3As, but has no authority over them. The Away Day discussions, therefore, may recommend structural changes – indeed, the papers submitted do just that – but such changes are aimed mostly at making a more efficient mechanism to achieve already agreed aims. None of them appears to question or even to identify the core values which underpin the structures themselves. After the immediate TAT discussions we need a wide ranging discussion among the other interested parties, the regions, networks, individual U3As, and above all and (hardest to reach) the individual members. Hopefully this, with appropriate consultations both ways, can lead to solid proposals coming forward to the 2011 TAT AGM.

Our movement is characterised by unpaid volunteers, lots of them, including many nearly full time! There are probably 1000 volunteer hours for every paid hour overall. Most of our apparent difficulties spring from the enormous difficulty in getting efficient communications throughout such an organisation with very few paid staff. We must redouble our efforts to ease this problem by every means at our disposal. Saturating people with massive amounts of information is almost as inimical to real communication as is starving them of information. We must all be innovative and strive to make information available in a way that enables us to access that which we need or want selectively with minimal waste of time.

At the individual U3A level what contributes to success or failure? To describe a good U3A in general terms is almost impossible. Some key words are probably friendship, vitality, good humour, a sense of purpose and involvement. Most successful U3As appear to have busy groups that cover a wide range of interests. Members attend because they enjoy the experience and for few other reasons. It is obvious to state that members who do not enjoy their U3A simply leave it. The atmosphere is therefore very positive. These observations are true whether the U3A has 50 members or 500. What causes a U3A most difficulty? When the impression given is not friendly but unfriendly, not vital but moribund, lacking humour, aimless, and when the members take little active part in proceedings, then the U3A is likely to be failing. A U3A consists of grown-ups, not children.

The policy of encouraging some kind of regional structure within each region has proved generally popular. The U3A movement has been called 'a learning co-operative' and that is a useful label for it. Without co-operation we are nothing. A problem as the movement grows to giant size is that the co-operation may be restricted to small and manageable communities. They begin with the interest group, then it has been an observable, natural progression for such groups to seek co-operation not only within their own U3A, but also by making contact with nearby U3As. Thus the local networks were born. They have never been imposed. Attempts to extend this idea have been slow to catch on in some places, but in others the benefits have been recognised for some time. The ultimate expression of this desire is, of course, the Annual Conference convened by the Third Age Trust. The bigger the groupings involved, the more difficult they are to organise.

We advocate getting together in groups to share interests and experience. That sums up our philosophy and it works.

In the ensuing discussion the following points emerged.

1. TAT has about 8 or 9 full time equivalents on its payroll although many of the staff are part-time. The biggest contribution to TAT costs are inevitably these salaries.
2. Since U3As are members of Regions it is not appropriate for regions to charge any fee for membership. TAT are funding the core activities of the Region although of course additional activities are, and must be, on balance self financing. Networks are voluntary and so can and do charge in various ways.
3. Capitation fees are for individuals, so if, and only if, individual U3As wish, they need not each collect and pay a capitation fee for those who are members of more than one U3A. The problem is that checks need to be made on an annual basis or else somebody cannot be insured or get the advantages of membership of the national body. Hence many U3As feel the administration is too onerous and they just treat such members in the same way as any other.

Lin Jonas started by saying how important she thought it was to be in touch at a personal level with individual U3A members and how much she enjoyed this aspect of her work. She had been at TAT for 14 years, longer than in any previous job because she found it such a marvellous organisation. She reminded us all that everything that the paid staff do they do for us, the members. On specifics there were lots of questions on each of her topics and the answers to these are included in the following. Lin divided her remarks into groups. The first group were **insurance** matters.

All U3As have public liability insurance with an excess of £250. The most important aspect of this policy is that group leaders are completely covered. Our claims record is good with little more than a handful of claims per year which is a credit to the common sense and responsible approach of U3A members and group leaders. However, it is not personal accident insurance. There is cover for paid speakers at monthly meetings, but it does not cover anyone who, in exceptional circumstances where internal expertise is not available, is paid to run a group on a regular basis. In these circumstances, it is essential to have a copy of their public liability insurance cover note and a letter stating that they are responsible for their own tax and national insurance and quoting their national insurance number. If you do, this you cannot be regarded as an employer.

We have charity trustee indemnity insurance which covers all members of U3A committees, who are all trustees in law regardless of whether the U3A is registered with the Charity Commission. It provides indemnity for the legal liability of a trustee for loss which results from a wrongful act or for the destruction of or damage to documents.

The Trust has taken tour operator insurance which extends the liability insurance to group leaders who may want to take their group away for an overnight stay. It provides no cover for money, so caution is required when booking transport and accommodation. It does not cover holidays and no U3A member should be organising holidays other than through a travel agent or tour operator.

Equipment insurance (on a new for old basis) is available and many U3As take up this option which applies wherever equipment is stored, provided it has satisfactory security and when it is in transit. It has a £50 excess.

On **personal data**, she stressed that data about members should be available to committee members on a 'need to know' basis. Full membership data for example should not be needed by all committee members and many U3As confine it to the membership secretary and the treasurer. Obviously it is vital that more than one person has the whole database. Other members may need email addresses and/or telephone numbers but are unlikely to need addresses.

On matters related to our **charity** status Lin covered several areas

1. Although one charity cannot for example make donations to another from the funds which it has received to fulfil its objectives, it is quite OK to pay for services such as room hire. Similarly if a monthly meeting speaker asks for his/her fee to be paid to a charity of his/her choice that is also allowed.
2. On Investment Clubs or Groups, it depends on whether these are 'fantasy' groups which do not actually invest or whether they are actual trading groups. If they trade they **MUST** operate completely separately from their U3A and not be in any way attached to them, although they may be made up exclusively of U3A members. Fantasy groups which involve no money or trading are allowed if a particular U3A wishes to operate them.
3. As regard audits and registration with the Charity Commissioners, there are various thresholds. Charity Registration is required once income exceeds £5000 and discouraged until that time. All U3As with an income under £250,000 should have their accounts examined by a person with the requisite knowledge and practical experience. If income exceeds that, the examiner needs to be appropriately qualified with membership of a relevant professional body. An audit is only required when income exceeds £500,000. For further details, consult the Charity Commission website which has many useful publications.

Lin also reminded us that we can all use the **legal advice** service which is free for all U3A members. The direct phone number is 01455 251500 and the code number 70494.

After Lunch we divided into 3 groups in separate rooms to discuss 3 topics each for about 40 minutes. The Chairs and Secretaries for each of the three subjects (all NW U3A Regional Executive Committee members) moved from room to room and each group had one of these sessions with Ian Searle and Lin Jonas. The following are summaries from each of the topics. Kathleen Mercier and/or John Ellison also visited each group. Each topic had a list of suggested questions to try to give some structure to the discussion.

### Local U3A questions (chair Mary-Ann Renton, secretary Grant Bramwell)

#### **1 To remain healthy U3As need to continuously recruit new members. Do some U3As put up barriers to this and how can they be overcome? Are U3As getting a regular turnover in both committees and group leaders?**

1. The U3As represented varied in size from 35 members to 1700, with an average size of approx 300 – twelve in the 700's. The smallest U3A had suffered from a past chairman who positively discouraged increasing the size. Also competition from many other local societies. Several U3As were not keen to get larger because of the restrictions on meeting room size.
2. A few U3As had two tier membership – members able to come to groups, but not able to attend the monthly meeting. This was thought to be a bad principle. A better idea was to duplicate the monthly meeting.
3. The largest U3A had coped with numbers by spawning other local U3As.
4. The larger U3As were happy to continue increasing their numbers, provided they were able also to continue increasing their number of interest groups. The guideline is one interest group to every ten members.
5. Committee membership seems generally to work on a strict time limit, although some U3As often found it difficult to recruit new committee members. Direct approach to members seems to be the best bet.
6. Group leaders are generally not rotated and can often serve for a very long time. A rotation of group leaders was thought to be a good idea, but difficult and politically sensitive. It was suggested by one vice chairman that group leaders should work to a definite time span, so as to force in new blood.
7. A palliative to the lack of rotation of group leaders was to ensure that each leader had a deputy and that different sessions were run by different members of the group. Also differentiate between Co-ordinators and Group Leaders – have both for a group.

#### **2. Should U3As have truly educational groups or should we continue to be a broad church ?**

Overwhelmingly it was felt that U3As should have a good balance of Educational and Social. Each U3A to decide its

own balance.

### **3. Volunteers are fundamental to the movement, so how do we ensure a good working relationship and understanding between them and the paid employees of TAT?**

This question was not felt to be well worded. It was felt wrong to suggest any split between U3As and the TAT. Lin Jonas in particular would have preferred the term "colleagues" to "paid employees" A good working relationship does prevail.

### **4. How can U3As improve dissemination and collection of information and views within their U3As?**

Ensure that the NW Region News is put on all NWU3A websites as soon as received and circulated to all committee members and group leaders who are not on the internet.

Encourage attendance at NW events by announcements at monthly meetings and in groups

Events/seminars etc being run by individual U3As which could be open to other U3As can be highlighted on the NW website.

Internal collection of views within U3As should be routed through the Group Leaders to the co-ordinator of the groups or appointed committee members as appropriate.

## Region and Network U3A questions (chair David Starling, secretary Jose Anderson)

Communication is vital - must be two way and in diverse forms to reach all members

Region should support U3As - preferably in their own area rather than having events where people have to travel distances

Centralise events

Provide U3As with a list of approved speakers

Have regional resources - unspecified as to what this would cover

Study days

Training for language teachers

Help U3As in trouble

Help U3As solve problems by finding someone who has already had the problem and found a solution - perhaps a problem page on web-site or in Newsletter or both.

Advise on encouraging members to join committee/become a group leader or leaders understudy

Be a mentoring service

Clearing house for new groups

Regional network of group coordinators

In all three groups there was a need to explain the difference between Networks & Regions.

Ian Searle gave historical background. Networks are a neighbourhood grouping of U3As - spontaneous - voluntary. Regions evolved from old areas and were set up to elect Regional Representative. Regional committees are now developing in some areas and these can help support the Rep in their work and also run local events. Lin Jonas stressed that NEC organised events will and must continue as the benefits of these in bringing together members from all over the country are immeasurable.

Ian Searle also explained that the Trust has no authority over U3As and cannot tell them what to do but U3As can tell the Trust what they want to happen. The analogy of the inverted pyramid was used with the NEC at the point.

## National U3A questions (chair Meg Shaw, secretary Trevor Cheetham)

In her opening remarks to each of the three groups Meg Shaw introduced herself as the former NW Regional Trustee, and former Vice Chair of the Third Age Trust. She spoke of the need to elect a new Regional Trustee following the recent resignation of Alex. McMinn, and expanded on the dual role of the R.T., to represent the movement to others and to support U3As within the Region

The meeting then focussed on the particular topic of how the two-way communication between the Trust and NEC, and constituent U3As and their membership, might best be effected.

As far as communication down from the TAT was concerned, a telling point was made by several of those present exhibiting a lack of awareness of some of the support functions available from the TAT.

This pointed to there being a communication problem further down the line, between individual U3As and their members. Available channels of communication were reviewed and there was a discussion of how these and other, novel, means might be better used. As to bottom-up communication there was within each group a lively debate from two widely disparate points of view.

On the grounds of democracy and transparency it was proposed that members of each U3A should become more closely involved in the the deliberations of the NEC, that documents for consideration at NEC meetings should be disseminated to all U3As for discussion and feedback 'a green paper'. With vigorous opposition on pragmatic grounds there finally emerged a consensus that we should Trust the Trustees and let the NEC get on with it.

John Ellison introduced the final session by thanking all the people involved and in particular Ian and Lin for their very valuable contributions. He stressed a few messages that he thought had come out most clearly from the day.

1. The willingness of TAT to consult and adapt to the changing needs of the movement.
2. The extreme importance and difficulty in communications between all aspects of the movement. Within U3As, U3As to Regions and Networks, U3As to TAT and National Office, Networks and Regions to TAT and National Office. Each is a challenge in both directions. We must exploit every mode available. There is no single method that comes near to covering all our diverse needs.
3. The need to achieving freshness and growth in U3As. We often fail to have a sensible rotation of individual U3A officers and committee members. We need to introduce freshness into subject groups by including succession planning and emphasis on contributions from many members of each such group. The role of the Region and the Networks needs to evolve now we have a Regional structure.

The Chairs of the individual Topic discussions then gave short reports for each of their topics. An expanded account is given above so this is not repeated here.

There was then a chance to raise questions or open topics not covered earlier. A discussion developed on aspects of our membership with its strong female/male ratio, its very low fraction of ethnic minorities and high fraction of graduates or graduate equivalent (~60%). Lin reminded us that a lot of effort had been expended in trying to broaden in particular the ethnic mix and the only case which had worked was one which arose completely spontaneously. The consensus seemed to be that we should accept that we are catering for a sub-set of the population who have an interest in learning. We are not a general older peoples social club. As regard ethnic minorities, it is clear that the fraction of them in our age cohort who are fully integrated with British rather than their birth culture is still modest but will change as people brought up in the UK retire in large numbers. As regard the shortage of men it is probably best addressed by having more groups in our U3As with a technical, scientific and physical activities bias which usually have a larger male fraction of participants than craft or art or similar groups (c.f. long term gender biases between different subjects in UK University undergraduates).

It was suggested and agreed that the NW Newsletter and Website should contain a section on Network Matters which would contain pieces on Network Activities or items from U3A which were relevant to other local U3As.

The challenges of 4<sup>th</sup> agers particularly those who have been active in U3A in their third age was discussed briefly. This is not an easy problem to address. The fact that the online U3A has attracted less than 100 members may show the difficulty in using the online route, but may reflect more on the strong correlation of IT skills with our younger members.

Finally Kathleen Mercier thanked everybody for a very stimulating day. She reminded us all that the NW Region has now produced 5 Newsletters in 8 months and has a website <http://nwu3a.web.officelive.com>. (Note that nwu3a.net in a search engine should find this site provided you do not restrict to UK sites.) Please bookmark it! She stressed that the NWREC need to know what you want us to organise in the way of activities. So please tell us!