

Setting up a New U3A Group

If you have an interest you'd like to share with others, then you have the basis for establishing a group.

Your first step is to contact the Chair of U3A who will discuss options with you and may advertise in the Newsletter for 'expressions of interest'. At this stage, with the help of the Chair if you wish, you might want to consider a number of things such as:

- Whether an initial meeting is also required as a first step to 'test the water' if you are unsure of possible interest
- The minimum and maximum number you'd like your group to be or alternatively whether to make it an 'open' group with no upper limit.
- When you'd like to meet – day and week(s) of the month; time; duration etc.
- Possible venue
- Likely resources needed
- The 'shape' of the meetings
- Safety issues

Deciding the size of the group

To some extent this will be determined by the kinds of activities intended. If you plan to base the activities around e.g. speakers, either yourself or other members or external, you can accommodate larger numbers. However, if the activities are based around e.g. discussion or practical sessions, you may have to restrict numbers. Available or preferred venues may also influence your decision.

Examples:

- *NZ History uses speakers so has no upper limit at this stage; Moreover, people come along or not depending on their interest in that month's topic.*
- *Book Group and Poetry for Pleasure both involve discussion of each member's chosen literature so are limited to about 10, which is the maximum that can be comfortably covered in a two hour slot and in their smaller venues.*
- *The size of Movies for Enthusiasts is determined by the size of the private cinema where the movies are shown.*

When to Meet

U3A tries to accommodate all groups with as little overlap as possible to allow members the widest possible choices. However, as more people join and more groups are established this becomes increasingly difficult. Again, it is best to consult the Chair for advice about your preferred slot(s) or have a look at the current programme on the Website.

Meetings are usually monthly (e.g. first Monday) but sometimes twice monthly (e.g. Monday first and third week) Generally, though, U3A groups meet for two to three hours, either in the morning (usually starting at 10.00 or 10.30am) or afternoon (usually starting somewhere between 1.00 and 2.00pm), and sometimes including a break for tea and coffee – or beginning or ending with this social get together. Although less common, evening or weekend meetings are also possible. Wednesday afternoon scheduling is discouraged to allow for general U3A activities such as the Seminars, as are fortnightly meetings because they fit uncomfortably in overall scheduling.

Examples:

- *NZ History begins at 10.00am with morning tea before starting the meeting itself at 10.30pm.*
- *Writing Your Memoirs and For the Love of Plants, although meeting in the morning (10.00am) and afternoon (1.00pm) respectively, break half way through when a 'natural' break occurs between activities. The latter adds an extra half hour to the two-hour meeting time for this purpose whereas the former includes the break within the two-hours.*

- Movies for Enthusiasts and Books adjourn after their meetings to a local café.
- Astronomy meets in the evening.

Venues

Groups can operate in a variety of venues depending on preferences, size of group, cost, availability etc. Many smaller groups meet in a member's home, usually the Coordinator's, which has the advantage of no cost, although no one should feel pressured to offer their home. Therefore, a list of other possible venues, contact persons and current costs is available from the Chair including halls, community centres, libraries etc.

Resources

Many groups require no resources to operate successfully whereas others depend on these. The cost of a venue is, perhaps, the main item to consider but other costs may include stationery such as white board pens or chart paper, DVDs, course materials etc. Members already pay their U3A subscription to be able to join groups but it is permissible to charge a small fee to cover these other costs – \$2 - \$3 per meeting is usual. Again, discuss this with the Chair if necessary.

In terms of breaks, you may want to draw up a roster for members to contribute at least the milk and biscuits, while you, perhaps, supply the tea, coffee and sugar.

U3A also owns a data projector, which can be connected to a laptop or tablet computer; a sound system with microphones; and a DVD player, all of which may be booked. There is also a U3A sandwich board available to indicate a venue, which is particularly useful for initial meetings.

Safety and Wellbeing

All group members are adults and, therefore, can be expected to be responsible for their own wellbeing so Coordinators need not worry unduly about this aspect. However, it is advisable to check out safe exits, that they're accessible and able to be opened in an emergency; also, the position of any fire extinguishers, placement of toilets etc. If you do not have a cell phone yourself it may be helpful to know who in the group does, in case 111 must be called. Basic common sense, such as would operate in any social situation, will be your main guide.

Facilitator Support

As a Coordinator you become part of a network that supports your activities:

Coordinator meetings are held twice a year to meet other Coordinators and the U3A Committee and to share ideas and help resolve problems and issues.

A mentor to assist with planning or running a group or to provide ideas may also be appointed on request. While this applies mainly for new Coordinators to 'find their feet'; that is, to provide support in gaining confidence, more established Coordinators may also request such input if they feel they'd like it. Gaining fresh ideas or dealing with a difficult member or situation (although these are rare) may be reasons for such interventions. These interactions will be confidential only to the parties involved once the 'match' has been made.

So finally ...

If you have an interest that isn't catered for already in U3A, please seriously consider establishing a new group. Existing coordinators will certainly attest to how rewarding this is and it need not be a daunting undertaking. Consider whether you would be happy meeting with like-minded friends, perhaps over coffee, and talking about that interest informally. If you answer 'yes', then you are 'qualified' to begin a new U3A group. It's a lot of fun. Give it a go!