

About the u3a

What is the u3a?

The University of the Third Age in the UK was inspired by a French idea, 'L'Université du Troisième Age', founded in Toulouse in 1972 to offer older people a range of cultural activities. When the idea was brought across the Channel in 1981 it was met with great enthusiasm. But the model proposed by our founders – Peter Laslett, Michael Young and Eric Midwinter – was different from the French version in one vital way: instead of being guided by traditional universities, u3as in the UK would be led by the members themselves.

A new way of learning

The u3a is different from most other adult learning organisations. Rather than paying people to teach us, we encourage members to share their knowledge and talents with other members. Interest Groups are where people can come together to share ideas – where the teachers learn and the learners teach, all as u3a members. As a result, u3a members both contribute to and enjoy a wide range of stimulating Interest Groups in an atmosphere of mutual support and companionship.

The Third Age Trust

In 1983, the year after the u3a was established in the UK, its founders set up a national umbrella organisation called The Third Age Trust, comprising a national executive committee elected by u3a members and a national office with full-time staff. The trust and its national office would not control u3as; rather, it would act as the guardian of the ethos and principles of the u3a movement, responsible for developing new u3as and providing them with support.

Everyone can play a part

The Third Age Trust helps set up new u3as, but local members willing to give their time, energy and commitment are always needed. Our unique self-help ethos means that u3as are only successful and sustainable if members are willing to offer their services. A u3a does not provide services for its members – members provide them for each other. There are so many ways to contribute to your local u3a, and everyone can do something they enjoy. It may be helping to coordinate an Interest Group, volunteering for the committee, organising speakers for the Monthly Meetings, preparing refreshments, putting out chairs or planning trips, outings and social events – the list is endless. Our members enrich their lives with new skills and experiences, pursue their interests, form new friendships and enjoy a sense of belonging to a widespread community.