

Brian Williams, Chairman of Ferndown U3A, writes:

'I have been asked many times What is the U3A? How can the organisation offer so much activity at such a low cost?'

The aim of the U3A Movement is for members of interest groups to contribute, in many different ways, to the success of the local organisation without the assistance of non-U3A members. This mutual learning model is as appropriate today as it was when the U3A Movement was founded in the early 1980s. Reference to the original principles of the U3A movement gives the detail of those aims.

The U3A Movement is non-religious and non-political, and has three main principles:

THE THIRD AGE PRINCIPLE

- 1. Membership of a U3A is open to all in their third age, which is defined not by a particular age but by a period in life in which full-time employment has ceased.**
- 2. Members promote the values of lifelong learning and the positive attributes of belonging to a U3A.**
- 3. Members do all they can to ensure that people wanting to join a U3A can do so.**

THE SELF-HELP LEARNING PRINCIPLE

- 1. Members form interest groups covering as wide a range of topics and activities as they desire, on the principle of *'by the members for the members'*.**
- 2. No qualifications are sought or offered. Learning is for its own sake, with enjoyment being the prime motive, not qualifications or awards.**
- 3. There is no distinction between the learners and the teachers; they are all U3A members.**

THE MUTUAL AID PRINCIPLE

- 1. Each U3A is a mutual aid organisation, operationally independent but a member of the Third Age Trust which requires adherence to the guiding principles of the U3A movement.**
- 2. No payments are made to members for services rendered to any U3A.**
- 3. Each U3A is self-funded, with membership subscriptions and costs kept as low as possible.**
- 4. Outside financial assistance is sought only if it does not imperil the integrity of the U3A movement.**

The Third Age Trust is the national support and advisory body for the U3As in the UK. The Trust cannot direct U3As, but has a duty to advise on good practice and on hazards to be avoided. The Trust cannot absolve individual U3As of the consequences of their actions. In England each individual U3A is itself a charitable organisation. Its committee members are the Trustees of the individual U3A, and as such are legally responsible for all decisions taken for the running of that U3A.

Paid tutoring is not an option encouraged by the Third Age Trust, because of particular difficulties with public liability insurance and self-employed status. The Trust's recommendations are *'Given the dilution of the unique ethos of the U3A and the difficulties of protecting the U3A and its members from legal challenges and HMRC penalties, the trust recommends individual U3A Committees, as the trustees of their U3A, to adopt a policy of not having interest groups that require paid tutors. This applies equally, of course, to auxiliary or support staff'*. There is a double benefit in following this policy - it protects the individual U3A from prosecution, and keeps the cost of our activities to a minimum.

Hence in U3As across the country there are groups of unpaid volunteers organising activities in their area. With regard to Ferndown U3A, there are around 75 different activities its members can enjoy. A

member with a lot of stamina and commitment can participate in eight different groups a week for 28 weeks a year, making a total number of 224 activities. On top of this there are regular extra-curriculum activities such as nature and distance walks, skittles etc. - all this for an annual subscription of £47.00! As a comparison, an organisation such as WEA - which offers excellent courses - pays its tutors and administrators. Thus a course consisting of seven lectures costs an individual £50.00 for that one course: further courses have to be paid for as and when they are attended.

I hope this answers your questions on the U3A project, and encourages you to participate in your classes more actively, and to persuade your friends to join such a stimulating and interesting organisation'.