u3a

Interest Groups Online Group Leader Handbook



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Welcome



Thank you so much for offering to lead a group with Interest Groups Online (IGO). At u3a, members learn from and with each other. This depends on members like you stepping forward to share your skills and enthusiasm.

Interest Groups Online is u3a's online learning community. There are over 150 online interest groups from AI to Zentangle. IGO is part of u3a, a UK-wide membership organisation where members meet together to continue their creative, learning and social interests in locally based interest groups.

A few things guide everything we do:

- **We're all learners and teachers** – everyone learns from each other and joins in.
- **u3a is a member-led movement** – IGO group leaders volunteer their time to share their skills, having fun along the way.
- **Groups are inclusive and open to everyone**, regardless of background. Depending on the focus, some groups may require prior knowledge to ensure the best experience for everyone.

This handbook will give some tips and things to consider about starting and running an online interest group.

Setting up a group

Taking the lead

All you need to start an interest group is enthusiasm and other members who are willing to join in. You don't need to be an expert, a qualified teacher, or even particularly experienced in your interest. A big crowd of potential members isn't needed either – just two or three people with a shared interest is enough.

There are two ways that you can set up a new interest group. If you would like to run it yourself, you can set up a **new group**. If you would like to attract members to run a group cooperatively, you can set up a **potential group**.

Setting up a new group

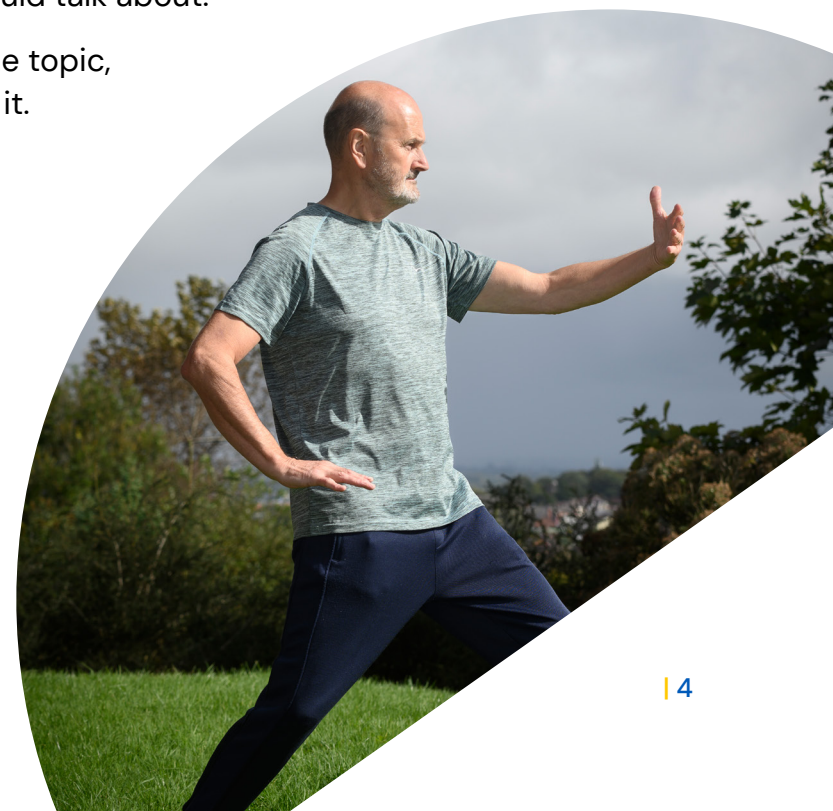
Your first step is to submit a **Group Description Form**, which sets out your ideas of what the group will cover and when it will run. If approved, the IGO team will then contact you to discuss the group meeting time. Next, we will create a page about your group on the IGO section of the u3a website and Beacon. We will then promote your group in the IGO News Extra and the u3a Online Learning Events newsletter. This means that you can start attracting members right away.

Setting up a potential group

To set up a potential group, email **interestgroupsonline@u3a.org.uk**. The first step is to attract members who might be happy to lead the group cooperatively. To do this, the team will set up pages about your group on the IGO section of the u3a website and Beacon and promote your group through the News Extra and Online Learning Events newsletter.

When enough people are interested, the team will arrange a meeting between prospective members to discuss how the group might run. The first Potential Group meeting is about ideas, not details. You could talk about:

- What you would like to do together – the topic, the style, and how long you want to run it.
- The knowledge or resources you already have within the group.
- The practical things you need, such as materials or speakers.
- How you might mix up the programme to keep it interesting.



Your group description



This will be on the IGO group page and will be the first thing that members read about your group. Your description should include details of when and how often your group will meet, the activities you'll cover and the format of group meetings.

This is a great place to set expectations for members, including whether regular attendance is required and whether members are expected to prepare materials in between meetings.

Sharing responsibility

Before you have your first meeting, it's worth considering whether any aspects of the group leader role can be shared. This works really well and helps to sustain groups over a long period of time. You could share out jobs such as:

- running a group Padlet
- sending out Zoom links and resources via Beacon
- putting together schedules for upcoming meetings
- leading different sections of the meeting or making resources.

Your first meeting

The first meeting of your group sets the model for future group sessions. Think carefully about your expectations for members – you can do this together if your group is run cooperatively. Here are some things you could consider:

- What will a typical meeting look like?
- How will you make sure all your group members are heard?
- How will you stop individual members from dominating a group discussion?
- What commitment and preparation do you expect from members?

It is a good idea to run through these expectations at the start of your meetings, especially when you have new members.

Learning together

There's no single way to run an interest group. In fact, mixing up your approach can make things more enjoyable. This section includes examples of the different ways that IGO groups like to learn.

- Research and share
- Read and discuss
- Discussion groups
- Bring and share
- Working through a novel or a course book
- Language groups
- Quizzes
- Shared learning projects
- Physical activities



Research and share

In many groups, everyone takes turns leading or contributing. This could mean:

- A group leader presents a topic during one session and group members prepare offshoots of that topic for the next meeting.
- The whole group takes turns to present a topic.
- Splitting your topic into smaller sub-topics, with each member researching one sub-topic and sharing their findings.

Members don't have to be an expert on the topic they present – preparing something to share is a great way to learn more.

"My group members have surprised me with how keen they have been to prepare content for our sessions. I try to make sure the demand is quite small – finding a video or a book to share is a good starting point. Our members are full of enthusiasm for our subject, so there is actually a waiting list for people who want to contribute!"

For an example of how a group like this can work, read about the IGO local history group.

Read and discuss

For this type of group, members read, watch or listen to materials chosen by the leader in between meetings and then meet together to discuss them.

Leaders send out materials before each meeting for members to look over and think about. These materials can take the form of books, articles, video clips or documentaries. Discussion questions can be prepared in advance so that there is a framework for the discussion.

"We prepare our materials well in advance so that our members have time to read them before each session. Some of the materials are articles from journals and we write material and discussion questions ourselves. The reading forms the basis of discussions and we encourage everyone to participate. We let all new members know that reading and preparation are an essential part of group membership so that they know what to expect. Preparing articles and questions can take a lot of time, so group members share admin tasks, including sending out the questions."

For more information of how a group like this can work, read about the IGO sociology group.

Discussion groups

Some groups exist mainly for discussion. This can be informal, such as the IGO Coffee and Conversation group, or have a specific focus such as current affairs or philosophy. In these groups, listening is as important as talking.

It's worth agreeing some simple ground rules:

- Let one person speak at a time;
- Ask people to maintain a respectful tone;
- Encourage balanced participation, where everyone has a chance to speak.

It can be best to avoid divisive subjects until the group is well established and members trust each other.

> "A group takes time and continuity of attendance to achieve a sense of shared purpose and mutual respect. You may get difficult members who talk over each other or disagree on a range of topics. I find patience eventually leads to a solution. When your group takes off, it all becomes worthwhile."

Bring and share

This approach might work well for learning about music or poetry. Members each choose a piece or poem and bring it to the group to share and discuss with others. A theme can be chosen by the group leader or collaboratively, or you can keep it more informal in a 'What are you reading?' or 'What are you watching?' group.

> "Members send me one piece of music in advance – that way I know what we will talk about and how many pieces I have for the meeting. Having one piece each helps ensure that everyone gets to share and to speak".

For an example of how a group like this can work, read about the IGO music sharing group.

Working through a novel or a course book

Some groups decide to meet to work through a whole book or course of study. This works well for language groups or for plays or novels. Depending on the group, members may complete sections in advance and discuss them together, or read, work through activities, and complete exercises collaboratively in the meeting itself.

"An online course that you log into and study on your own at any time is an excellent source of ready-made, structured material for a group. Between meetings our members, including the group leader, study the online course at the same steady pace. At meetings, we practise and discuss what we have learnt. This makes the online course more interesting for everyone."

For an example of how a group like this can work, read about the IGO world history group.

Language groups

Languages are extremely popular on IGO and we have many different group styles, from formal study to informal conversation. You might want to think about prior language knowledge that will be needed for your group and how you will communicate that to members.

"Our language conversation group is for members who already speak a language. While the group description sets out the minimum requirements, the group leader can also have a one-to-one chat with a prospective new member about the knowledge needed."

Quizzes

Quizzes are a fun way to learn and can be focused on any subject. Group members can take turns to host each time. Using a set of slides or a Padlet can help to bring the questions to life.

Shared learning projects

These are collaborative projects and can be directed towards a final outcome such as creating a Wikipedia page or booklet. Members undertake research, complete written sections and meet to discuss and share their progress.

"People can be quite nervous about creating PowerPoints. If you have members who are not stepping forward, suggest that they compose a piece of writing instead, which they can then read out. This can lead to slides in time."

Physical activities

Exercise and other activity groups are very popular on IGO. For this type of group, it can be useful to have a rehearsal so that you can check that you can be seen and heard well. If you need music, make sure you know how to share this without also sharing your screen.

You will also need to think about Health and Safety and advise your members of this before meetings – the IGO team are here to help you with this.

Testimonial

Sara,
IGO Beginners Family History group

I have been a u3a member of the Beginners Family History group for just under a year. The leader, Dawn, was amazing. She had both extensive knowledge and experience. However, as we all know, life sometimes throws us curveballs and she had to leave as leader of the group. She left such enormous shoes to fill.

So what happens now? I volunteered to facilitate the next meeting just to find out if between us we could keep the group going. Was there anyone who felt they could take on the leadership? We all felt we couldn't do it. After all we were ALL beginners.

But, after a very interactive meeting, we came to the conclusion that we all had much to learn but we also all had much to offer.

We came up with a list of topics we would be interested in and agreed to "give it a go".

So I agreed to take it on with the understanding that being a fulltime carer for my 94 year old Mum, I too may have my challenges some months.

I was set up on the Beacon site as an administrator for the group. Once logged on I was amazed at just how much instant support was available on the site. I managed to email all the group members through Beacon to find out if they wanted to continue as members. I also attached the schedule for the next six months.

So I found that, yes, I can be a beginner in the subject and be a leader of the group too. Our plan is now to put into practice what Dawn taught us, share that knowledge with "Newbies" and learn from each other. Which is what u3a is all about.

Supporting group leaders

Interest Groups Online is about members learning together. You, group leaders, are the people who make that happen. There is a range of support available to you in your role.

New group leader training

Training sessions take place once a month to help with the practical issues of running a group. These sessions cover managing your group and how to use Zoom and Beacon. Every session ends with a chance to ask questions.

Established Group Leaders are also welcome at these sessions – you can always drop in at the end of the session to ask questions around particular topics.

Group leader bulletins

We send out a bulletin once a month via Beacon to Group Leaders with important updates and news.

Group leader meetings

These take place three times a year and are a chance to keep up to date with important changes. The meetings cover ways to develop your meeting skills and each meeting divides into breakout rooms, giving you an opportunity to discuss topics with other IGO group leaders. The meetings end with the opportunity to ask questions.

Padlet

Padlet is a simple, visual online tool that lets members easily share ideas, links, images, and discussions in one shared online space. It's especially useful for Interest Groups Online because it encourages participation and collaboration. IGO holds a Padlet account with spaces for all Group Leaders. Each Padlet acts as an online noticeboard and allow members to share resources, schedules, pictures, videos and comments.

Find out more about Padlet by emailing interestgroupsonline@u3a.org.uk.



News extra

This is our monthly newsletter which promotes new and potential groups. It's a really helpful way to gain publicity for your group. It's particularly useful for new groups hoping to attract new members. Well-established groups are also welcome to write articles either to attract new members or to celebrate their achievements. The deadline for submissions is the second Thursday of the month – to submit an article, email interestgroupsonline@u3a.org.uk.

Read past News Extras on the Interest Groups Online Noticeboard.

Beacon

Beacon is our group management software which enables you to email your group while keeping to GDPR rules. It lets you set up automated messages, such as a standard welcome email for new members and a recurring email with your Zoom link sent before each meeting. These features are covered in our New Group Leader Training.

When things go wrong

Even with the best intentions, sometimes things go wrong. We encourage Group Leaders to address minor misunderstandings and disagreements where they can. If a situation needs additional support, the Interest Groups Online team are available to help manage more complex issues. Please follow our recommended processes, which can be found in the IGO group guidelines.



Resources

Our members

Our biggest strength is our members. Like all u3as, Interest Groups Online is full of people with skills, experiences, and interests they're happy to share. Often, someone already knows something about the topic your group wants to explore and they can point you towards more resources.

Subject Advisers

Subject Advisers are members with specialist knowledge who are happy to help u3a groups in their subject area. They can recommend materials and suggest ways to tackle a subject. Find and contact Subject advisers on the **Subject Advice page** of the u3a website.

Online courses and learning platforms

There are lots of online resources that can be helpful for your group.
Here are some suggestions of where to start:

- **u3a Online Learning Events** – Free for u3a members.
- **FutureLearn** – Short courses from universities and cultural institutions around the world.
- **Coursera** – University-level courses in almost any subject you can think of.
- **OpenLearn** – The Open University's free learning site.
- **Khan Academy** – Clear, well-structured lessons, especially for maths, science, and history.
- **YouTube** – Thousands of high-quality educational channels on everything from art history to astronomy.
- **edX** (often offers university-level study for free).



Groups can work through a course together or individuals can take one and share what they've learned.

The Internet

There's so much information online – the trick is knowing which sources to trust. Try to cross-check anything important and bookmark sites you find reliable.

We recommend exploring what's out there. Here are a few websites to start - Project Gutenberg, The National Archives UK, VADS and Google Scholar.

Libraries and archives

Local libraries remain a great source of books, audiobooks, and research help. Many now offer:

- Free e-books and audiobooks you can borrow online.
- Access to magazines and newspapers via apps like Libby or PressReader.
- Help to locate multiple copies of a book for a group.

Local museums, archives, and historical societies can also be brilliant sources of information.



Who to contact?

For ideas of how different groups run, have a look at our group examples on the **IGO Group Leader Resources page**.

More support for IGO Group Leaders can be found on **the IGO Help and Information page**.

Your main point of contact will be the IGO team – **interestgroupsonline@u3a.org.uk**.

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learn, laugh, live

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