



Frequently Asked Questions

What does u3a stand for?

The u3a is one of many organisations which have decided that their acronym should become their official name so u3a is no longer an abbreviation or acronym but is the name itself. Other examples are IBM (International Business Machines), NCR (National Cash Register), BP (British Petroleum), BT (British Telecom), KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken), BMW (Bayerische Motoren Werke). U3A originally stood for University of the Third Age. One of the reasons for adopting simply u3a was that it was felt that University gave a misleading academic flavour.

Why is u3a lower case?

u3a was written in lowercase as a deliberate branding and philosophical choice implemented during the rebrand from University of the Third Age.

What is the Third Age?

First age: Childhood and education.

Second age: Working life and raising a family.

Third age: The period of life after finishing full-time work or parental responsibilities.

What does Learn, Laugh, Live mean?

Learn with others

Learning together, and from each other, is what u3a is all about. Everything the u3a does is member-led, and member-run, so the opportunities are endless.

Laugh with friends

This is learning with a difference. There are no teachers and students, no classes and no exams. The u3a offers interest groups and activities; it is all done just for fun with lots of laughter along the way.

As a volunteer movement, members all take it in turns to share skills and knowledge with each other.

Live for the moment

With u3a, retirement is just the beginning. By connecting with others through the things you love, you can rebuild your network and find your community. u3a can help you live later life with fun, purpose and adventure.

What is the history of the u3a?

The concept of the u3a originated in Toulouse, France in the 1970's as a way for older, retired people to continue to learn, often being affiliated to local universities (hence the name 'University of the Third Age' or u3a).

A modified version was later introduced into the UK in 1982, which was also focused on lifelong learning, but without the need for any form of qualification - rather, it is aimed at people no longer in full-time employment who want to continue to learn for pleasure and share their knowledge and experience in the company of others. There would be no distinction between the learners and those sharing their skills and knowledge – everyone could take a turn at being both if they wished. There is no upper or lower age limit.

The movement grew very quickly and by the early 1990s, a u3a was opening every fortnight. u3as started in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and in 2008 membership was increasing by 11% every year. 2010 saw membership hitting the quarter million mark. Currently, there are over 1000 local u3as in the UK with over 400,000 members.

The u3a movement has also become established internationally, with u3as in many other countries, each with their own unique way of doing things.

What is the Third Age Trust?

At national level, the u3a movement is represented by the Third Age Trust (TAT), a registered charity that provides services, advice and support to local u3as, as well as being active in publicising the u3a movement within the UK.

Their website offers a wide range of opportunities that any u3a member can become involved in – ranging from Learning activities and competitions, to National Events (including online) and Interest Groups Online (IGO). Members can also receive a monthly magazine “Third Age Matters” by post and u3a Friends newsletter by email.

The work of the Third Age Trust is governed by a Board of Trustees (elected, volunteer members) or governance/legal aspects. Two formal committees report to the Board, one on Finance and another on Governance. The Board receives reports and recommendations from these committees to enable the Trust to fulfil its objectives.

The Board also works closely with the u3a Council (the 'voice' of local u3as) to ensure that member voice is at the heart of strategy development. The Board is supported by administrative staff and is attended by the Chief Executive Officer, who is also Company Secretary, in a non-voting capacity, and, from time to time, by the senior managers from the u3a staff team.

What is the u3a movement?

The u3a movement is one of the largest membership organisations in the UK with over 430,000 active members in over 1,000 u3as. Membership is open to everyone who has stepped away from full-time work; from employment, caring for others or raising a family.

Everything at u3a is powered by volunteers. As a volunteer movement, members take it in turns to share skills and knowledge with each other. This is learning with a difference. There are no teachers and students, no classes and no exams. The u3a offers interest groups and activities; it is all done just for fun with lots of laughter along the way.

u3a empowers people in later life to live healthier, more connected, and purposeful lives. Through its peer-led, volunteer driven model, u3a fosters lifelong learning, social connection, and active contribution, creating a vibrant community of shared curiosity and purpose.

What are the guiding principles of the u3a movement?

The Third Age Principle

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 when full-time employment has ceased.

Members of a u3a promote the values of lifelong learning and the positive attributes of belonging to a u3a.

Members of a u3a should do all they can to ensure that everyone who wishes to join a u3a can do so.

The Self-help Learning Principle

Members of a u3a form interest groups, covering as wide a range of topics and activities as they desire, by the membership for the membership.

No qualifications are sought or offered. Enjoyment is the prime motive, not qualifications or awards.

The Mutual Aid Principle

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.

No payments are made to individual members for services rendered to any u3a.

Each u3a is self-funded with membership subscriptions and costs kept as low as possible.

Outside financial assistance should only be sought if it does not imperil the integrity of the u3a movement.

What are the Strategic Aims for the u3a movement?

These 4 Strategic Aims for u3a were shaped by the findings of a 2021 consultation:

1. To promote a u3a collective identity (Single u3a)
2. To maximise the benefits of u3a membership to current members and to attract the next generation (Next Gen)
3. To advance an exciting u3a learning experience (Enjoy)
4. To collaborate with like minded organisations at all levels of the movement (Emerge and Collaborate)

Who is Wilmslow u3a for?

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 when full-time employment has ceased so effectively Wilmslow u3a is open to anyone who has time to spare and wants to engage and explore activities to enjoy a healthy mind, healthy body and social interactions with other u3a members.

How much does u3a membership cost?

The annual individual membership fee is £14.00. An additional £2.50 is payable by those who wish to receive the Third Age Matters magazine.

Wilmslow u3a is entirely funded by its members.

In addition to attending the monthly meetings, Members can join Interest Groups and join centrally organised social activities (e.g. theatre outings). These may involve a contribution to cover costs (e.g. venue hire).

The membership fee includes the u3a national capitation fee of £4.00 per member paid to the Third Age Trust.

The Capitation Fee Covers:

Liability Insurance: Public liability and other essential insurance cover for local u3a groups and activities.

Administrative Support: Central advice, educational resources, and operational guidance for local branches.

National Representation: Management of the wider movement, workshops, and networking support.

How does Wilmslow u3a compare with The Wilmslow Guild?

The Guild's stated purposes are to provide lifelong learning opportunities through adult community education and social activities for the welfare of the whole community; to embrace lifelong learning and promote the advancement of education within the heart of our community by delivering high-quality adult education courses and social activities; to provide friendly and enjoyable learning opportunities with the aim of improving the wellbeing of the community, encouraging active citizenship and reducing social isolation. The Guild is a charitable educational institution and registered charity.

So, at first sight, the Guild may appear similar to the u3a but in fact is very different.

In the u3a there are generally no teachers. Members guide and learn from each other. These are two of the guiding principles of the u3a: The Self-help Learning Principle and Mutual Aid Principle.

A u3a Group may only use a paid tutor in exceptional circumstances. An example may be for a specialised activity particularly as a way of starting a new group for it to be sustained by u3a members after an introductory period.

The Guild runs courses led by paid Tutors with the cost being £176 for 10 sessions.

The annual individual membership fee for Wilmslow u3a is £14.00.

What impact can being a u3a member have?

According to the majority of studies and research that has been carried out, it is evident that joining the u3a has made a positive and healthy impact on the lives of its members with the majority of people experiencing definite improvements in their health and satisfaction with life. In terms of general health, well-being and cognitive abilities, studies show that u3a members score more highly than non-members and that attending u3a activities may help stave off mental decline. u3a activities tend to have an element of physical or mental exercise of some type which has a positive impact on the health of those involved. Socialisation of members at meetings has a good psychological impact on u3a members. Membership means being able to meet people with the same interests.

The major advantage is the ability to enjoy new interests and make great friends in a relaxed environment. In recent research, u3a members reported learning or developing skills, feeling valued, enjoying life more and feeling supported in new communities when they moved house.

Specific benefits mentioned included learning new skills (84%), building confidence (59%), feeling healthier (55%) and becoming engaged with the community (50%).

What will be expected of me as a u3a member?

Embrace self-help learning: Groups rely on members sharing their own skills, time, and enthusiasm rather than hiring outside professionals.

Contribute positively: Engage actively in your local interest groups or meetings and support the volunteers who run them.

u3a is a member-led organisation, with members running interest groups, sitting on local u3a committees, amplifying the voices of local u3as as Council members and shaping the direction of the u3a movement as Board members. As such, volunteering is key to the u3a ethos - without members volunteering to share their skills, time and enthusiasm, the u3a would be unable to thrive.

The volunteering ethos within u3a means that new members aren't limited by the groups that currently exist at their local u3a. There is always the option to start a new one.

Whatever your skills, share them with your u3a - talk to your u3a committee about how you can get involved. Find out about opportunities to support the u3a movement nationally as a Trust Volunteer on the Volunteering page.

Is Wilmslow u3a part of a national organisation?

Yes, certainly. The u3a movement is one of the largest membership organisations in the UK with over 430,000 active members in over 1,000 u3as.

Local u3as, such as Wilmslow u3a, are independent, self-help charities that are usually centred around towns and villages for easy access of the membership to their meeting places (often local halls or in people's homes). They each offer a wide variety of interest groups, which differ between u3as according to the interests of their members. The size of a local u3a can range from a few dozen to several thousand; Wilmslow u3a has about 400 members.

Although each u3a is an operationally independent, mutual aid organisation it is affiliated to the National organisation as a member of the Third Age Trust, which requires adherence to the guiding principles of the u3a movement.

In some areas, local u3as come together to form a Network, an informal grouping of u3as formed to provide help and support to each other. Wilmslow u3a is part of the North East Cheshire u3a Network. The following u3a's are members: Bramhall, Cheadle and Gatley, Macclesfield, Poynton, Stockport, Wilmslow. Networks across the UK can also share information and ideas via Network Link, an online forum that meets three times a year.

All u3as sit within one of 12 geographical u3a regions/nations, with each region/nation having both an elected Regional Trustee and a u3a Council representative, who can be contacted for information. Wilmslow u3a is part of the North West England u3a region, which occasionally organises activities or workshops across the region.

If I join Wilmslow u3a can I attend meetings and join groups of other u3a's?

To participate in the activities of another u3a you will need to join them as an Associate Member.

This should be at a reduced rate since the second u3a will not have to pay the £4 capitation fee to the Third Age Trust.

Members of u3a groups affiliated with the NE Cheshire Network may participate in other U3A 'Interest Groups' to a limited extent.

The participation is limited to those groups declared 'open' by the Group Leaders, in consultation with their Interest Groups Coordinator.

The open group approach supports fertilisation of ideas and social interactions outside the member's own u3a.

If I join Wilmslow u3a can I attend online u3a groups, events or courses?

There are plenty of different types of events online for members including talks, workshops and courses at no extra cost. These are led by members with a passion or a talent to share or by specialist guest speakers. Over the years, the U3A has built up relationships with leading organisations so can offer selected national events online – including events with the National Gallery, Royal Institution, Guildhall Art Gallery and the British Library (there may be a small charge for some of these). There are also workshops, webinars and

interactive sessions delivered by members which are free to join – but need to be booked. These can include Laughter Yoga Workshops, Seated Yoga, Live Cookery Demonstrations, Digital Skills, Writing Poetry for Publication and Performance, Sleep and Dreams and so much more.

What is the history of Wilmslow u3a?

Wilmslow u3a officially formed in November 2010 with about 150 founding members and a rollout of peer-led interest groups. By January 2011 regular monthly meetings with guest speakers had been established. In 2017 Wilmslow u3a achieved official registration as a charity and within the following six years its membership grew to over 400.