

TAM Summer 2016

## WHAT SORT OF NATIONAL STRUCTURE DO U3AS NEED?

John Russell of Kings Hill U3A has some suggestions

There seems to be a common view that the structure and organisation of the Third Age Trust needs change. Three former chairmen wrote an article (Opinion, spring 2016) with which I sympathise.

But it seems to propose a “solution” without giving any analysis or critique of the current problems they perceive, or what they are trying to achieve, or why the proposals will succeed in this.

It does seem timely to have a good look at the way we work from top to bottom – the number of U3As is about to reach the significant figure of 1,000; the Charity Commission seems to be paying more attention to us; and our growth seems to be stretching the current structure, with Regional Trustees feeling overworked, and recent expansion in paid employees.

I feel that the key to a successful review and outcome will require us to apply the principles of self help and learning from each other and recognise the unique principles of U3A.

In this situation, many commercial organisations would call in management consultants to carry out an organisational development (OD) project – at considerable cost.

We almost certainly have among our members many people with experience and skills (and common sense) who could carry out such an exercise with better judgement and at almost no cost.

Another point is that U3A is “unique”. This needs to be taken into account and to drive the solution. We are not like many charity organisations whose (laudable) objectives are to provide a “service” often to vulnerable or disadvantaged people in the community; so it does not follow that we should model ourselves on other major charities, although there may be some things useful to learn from them.

U3A does not need top down management and control, nor layers of management and administration, nor Trustees to take on executive and managerial duties.

The organisation works best when we have a simple “mission” and just a few objectives and principles, some guidelines on practical management and sharing of good practice. We do not need measures of “outcomes”, targets or rules. Similarly, we do not need a headquarters, or regional management.

We do need some national (small “n”) functions that aid all individual U3As. I believe the current national office actually provides most of what we need, but that there are misguided pressures to become more like a major charity “headquarters”, and to take on more tasks that are better left to local U3As.

It seems that the abilities of the members of a U3A are often underrated; the range of skills and experience on the executive committees are usually way beyond what’s needed to run a local U3A, so they do not need detailed guidance/instruction on how to run meetings, accounts, communications etc.

A key piece of “evidence” for an OD project would be the “write-up” that I understand Lin Jonas intends to write – she has surely done a marvellous job as a chief executive (in all but name) and has overseen many functions that benefit from a national approach with great success and efficiency with a small group of paid staff.

We seem to have drifted from the “leading” function in U3A being the resources of our people, in the form of subject experts.

The under use of the central resource centre is a good example, as is the lack of subject experts leading discussions at conferences, inspiring local U3As to follow their lead in learning.

Interestingly a recent issue of TAM has a couple of good articles on examples for learning, new subjects to explore, and sharing opportunities – we need more of this.

So let's have a proper review of what form of governance we need – remembering the U3A principles are simple, informal and involve using the knowledge and experience within our members, with minimal time spent on “management/admin” and more on enjoying the fun of learning with others with common interests.