

'I just don't have time': Why Merton U3A members
decide not to renew their membership

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Introduction

With over 849 members and 95 interest groups (at 1 January 2015), Merton U3A (MU3A) is thriving. Its Committee is aware of the need to ensure that it continues to attract new members, to retain existing members and to offer activities which meet the needs of local people. Like many U3As, the organisation fails to attract third agers in proportions representative of all local population groups. In particular, men and people from ethnic minorities are under-represented in MU3A. Recent research undertaken by MU3A has highlighted possible reasons for the underrepresentation of men (Ware, 2013) and explored the reasons why people join the organisation, how they hear about it, and their preferences for learning methods and meeting venues (Salvage and Mott, 2013).

To date, no comprehensive analysis has been undertaken on the reasons why people decide to discontinue their membership of MU3A. Renewal forms sent out to members each September do invite people who decide not to renew to give their reasons, but information received by the Membership Secretary has been patchy and following up non-responders by telephone is time-consuming.

Renewal forms for the membership year 2014-15 were posted to all MU3A members by the Membership Secretary (Sue Gregory) in August 2014. Those who had not renewed by 23 September 2014 were reminded by email (where possible) or by post that their subscription was due and a further reminder was included in MU3A's September 2014 newsletter (sent to all members). In November 2014, a list of MU3A members who had not renewed for 2014-15 was sent by the MU3A Membership Secretary to a MU3A member with research experience (Ann Salvage) who had offered to follow up those who had not renewed and had not provided information on the reasons for non-renewal.

At 20 November 2014, the total number of members who had not renewed their membership for 2014-15 was 136. This included nine partner memberships and the sex breakdown (including couples) was 31 males: 105 females. Information had already been obtained by the Membership Secretary on 41 females and 13 males (including four couples) and the remainder were followed-up to ascertain their reasons for non-renewal (further information was also sought on a small number of those on whom some information was already available).

Method

Former members on whom no information was available were telephoned using the telephone number provided on their application forms (usually landline numbers but in some cases, mobile telephone numbers). In many cases, it was necessary to make numerous attempts at different times of day before contact could be established. The researcher (Ann Salvage) told those contacted that she was calling on behalf of the MU3A Membership Secretary to check whether they would like to renew their membership and, if not, whether they had any comments or suggestions for improving the organisation.

Results

By the time attempts were made to contact the non-renewers, three females had renewed their membership. In five cases (four females and one male) the telephone number provided was not working or not recognised and one person contacted (a man) appeared to have cognitive and/or speech problems and was not understandable. One female could not be contacted despite repeated telephone calls. Results presented here are based on the remaining 126 non-renewers: 29 (23%) Male: 97 (77%) female. Table 1 summarises the responses given (* Couple):

Table 1: Reasons given for non-renewals and renewal intentions

Reason/intention	Male	Female	Total
Other activities			
Busy	8 (27%)	19 (20%)	27 (21%)
Working	1 (3%)	4 (4%)	5 (4%)
Health\mobility			
Health (member)	4 (14%)	13 (13%)	17 (13%)
Health (partner)	- (0%)	1 (1%)	1 (<1%)
Mobility	- (0%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)
Old age	- (0%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)
Death			
Death (member)	2 (7%)	3 (3%)	5 (4%)
Death (partner)	1 (3%)	2 (2%)	3 (2%)
Access/location			
Moved/moving	1 (3%)	16 (16%)	17 (13%)
Lives too far away	- (0%)	5 (5%)	5 (4%)
Been abroad	1 (3%)	- (0%)	1 (<1%)
Abroad in 2015	- (0%)	1 (1%)	1 (<1%)
Memory/information			
Forgot	2 (7%)	8 (8%)	10 (8%)
Not aware a member	1 (3%)	2 (2%)	3 (2%)
Not aware overdue	- (0%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)
Inactivity			
Not participating at present	3 (10%)	4 (4%)	7 (6%)
Changed Circumstances			
Unspecified	- (0%)	1 (1%)	1 (<1%)
Family problems	1 (3%)	1 (1%)	2* (2%)
Building disruption	1 (3%)	1 (1%)	2* (2%)
Not willing to give reasons	- (0%)	4 (4%)	4 (3%)
Problems\comments	3 (10%)	13 (13%)	16 (13%)
Intentions			
Will rejoin now	4 (14%)	11 (11%)	15 (12%)
May rejoin now	2 (7%)	3 (3%)	5 (4%)
Will rejoin later	1 (3%)	5 (5%)	6 (5%)
May rejoin later	4 (14%)	14 (14%)	18 (14%)
Total	29	97	126

Other activities

The most frequently-given reason for not renewing MU3A membership was that people had other claims on their time. Twenty seven people indicated that they were busy with other activities:

'Unfortunately, we have too many other commitments at this moment.' (Couple)

'I just don't have time.' (Female)

'Doing other things.' (Female)

'I joined when I was approaching retirement but I now find I have no free time!' (Male)

'I am committed with some other things.' (Female)

'I've been elected a councillor so I don't have time at the moment.' (Female)

Five respondents said that they were still working or had returned to work (including one who had returned to full-time employment):

'I'm now working on days when I used to attend classes.' (Female)

'I'm still working part-time so I don't have much free time but I will probably rejoin - maybe after Christmas.' (Female)

Health/mobility

Health problems and mobility (either mentioned specifically or indicated by reference to having to attend hospital appointments), poor mobility or advanced age were given as the reason for non-renewal by 20 ex-members. The most frequent reference was to poor health:

'I've got lots of hospital appointments this year, but I will join again next year.' (Female)

'I'm just cutting back on my activities because I don't have the strength I used to have.' (Female)

'I've been diagnosed with vascular dementia. The [support group] meetings clash with the group I used to attend.' (Female)

One respondent gave her partner's ill health as her main reason for non-renewal, two referred to reduced mobility and two cited advanced age:

'My husband has had a stroke.' (Female)

'I'm 92 now. Getting out is difficult and I'm partially sighted.' (Female)

Of those who cited health, mobility or old age as reasons for non-renewal, nearly half (9:45%) indicated that they would or might rejoin MU3A now or later.

Death

Five ex-members had died (three females and two males) and three people said that the death of their partner was the reason why they had decided not to renew their membership (two females and one male):

'[Husband] died in October. I'm trying to loosen my London ties but I may rejoin.'
(Female)

Access/location

Seventeen respondents (all but one of whom were female) had either moved home or were in the process of or considering moving. A further five ex-members (all female) said that they lived too far from MU3A venues to attend activities and that this was the reason why they had decided not to renew:

'I live in Tooting and I'm a member of Wandsworth U3A. There aren't any [MU3A] activities I can get to easily.' (Female)

'I'd like to do recorder but it's too far to travel.' (Female)

One man had been abroad when the reminder to renew his membership had arrived and one woman said that the reason she had not renewed her membership was that she would be abroad in 2015.

All those who mentioned moving had moved or were moving out of Merton (two had emigrated to other countries). One woman said that she was moving to Thames Ditton but might rejoin (depending on what else was available in her new area) and of those moving out of the area not all will be lost to U3A. One woman said she would be joining Epsom and Ewell U3A and another (with a special interest in music) said she would be joining Kingston U3A specifically to join the K3A Orchestra.

Memory/information issues

Ten people said they had forgotten to renew and of these, nine said they would definitely do so now and one said they might do so.

Three people did not remember being a member. Two were not aware that their subscription was now overdue and of these one said they would rejoin immediately and the other said they would consider doing so later.

Inactivity

Seven respondents said that they had decided not to rejoin MU3A as they were not participating in any activities at present:

'I joined to do Spanish but I go to Spain five times a year and it would be difficult to keep up a group membership, especially as a lot of groups close in the summer.'
(Male)

'I do not use any of the group activities.' (Male)

'The only class I did was recorder and I'm not attending that at present. I will rejoin next year.' (Female)

Of these seven people, three indicated that they might rejoin in the future and one said they would definitely do so.

Changed circumstances

Five people (including two couples) indicated that they had not renewed their membership because of a change in circumstances (in one case unspecified, in one - a couple - increased family responsibilities and one couple had not renewed as they had been in chaos with domestic building work):

'My circumstances have changed but hopefully I'll rejoin next year.' (Female)

'We've had some family problems.' (Couple)

All these respondents said that they hoped to rejoin once their lives were back to normal.

Not willing to give reasons

Four people (all women) were not prepared to give their reasons for not rejoining. Of these, one returned a form to the Membership Secretary but did not give a reason for non-renewal and three were telephoned but made it clear that they did not wish to elaborate on their decision.

Problems with/comments on MU3A

Sixteen people (three males and 13 females) either identified problems which had led them to discontinue their membership or made comments on MU3A.

No activities of interest

Five people had been unable to find groups or activities that interested them:

'I can't find anything that interests me.' (Female)

'There's nothing I really wanted to do.' (Female)

'I couldn't find my niche.' (Female)

'Just that I wasn't interested enough.' (Female)

'There are no activities I want to do.' (Female)

Groups oversubscribed

Three people said the groups they had wanted to join had been full:

'I was a bit disappointed that a lot of language groups are oversubscribed.' (Male)

'I wanted to do bridge but it was full up. There are no [other] activities I want to do.' (Male)

Classes on unsuitable days

Three people mentioned that the classes they were interested in were held on days of the week when they had other commitments:

'I can't find suitable groups or times. Also, I'm taking part in a number of other activities.' (Male)

'I joined to do Spanish but the group changed to a day I could not do.' (Female)

'I joined with my daughter. The activities we wanted to do were either full or on days we could not manage.' (Female)

No suitable groups

Two people had hoped to find a particular group but had been disappointed:

'I'd like to do needlework or needlepoint but there are no classes.' (Female)

'I joined to meet people interested in science and engineering. [Because there was no group available] I set up a science and engineering group but there wasn't enough interest and we agreed it wasn't viable.' (Female)

Classes disbanded

Two people referred to classes that had been disbanded:

'Our class stopped before Christmas due to a fall of student numbers. I'm looking at an alternative.' (Female)

General/specific criticisms

Three people had general criticisms of the organisation or specific criticisms of a class:

'I joined a French group once but it wasn't good enough and I'm busy with other things.' (Female)

'Not as good as it used to be!' (Written on form) (Female)

'I did not find the club atmosphere and social atmosphere and social contacts I was looking for. The membership was too large and not local.' (Female)

Active role desired

Two men said that they did not wish to renew their membership, but might be interested in taking leadership roles:

'[I don't want to rejoin] initially but I might lead walking or IT later.'

'I might be willing to take an active role.'

Intentions regarding membership

Forty four people who had not renewed (just over a third) indicated that they would or might renew, either immediately or in the future. Fifteen (11 females and four males) said they would rejoin immediately, some of them apologising for not having done so and/or expressing thanks for the reminder. Five (three females and two males) indicated that they would consider rejoining for 2014-15. Six (five females and one male) said they would rejoin later (most of these saying they would do this 'next year') and 18 (14 females and four males) indicated that they would consider rejoining at some time in the future.

Sex differences

Sex differences were examined, but the only clear difference was in the number of people who had moved or were thinking of moving or lived too far away to attend events: 22% of women and 3% of men. It was not possible to analyse the results by age as this information was not provided on application forms.

Discussion

Obtaining information on the reasons why former members of U3A decide not to renew their membership can be useful in a number of ways. Firstly, it can help individual U3As to identify any issues relating to the activities they offer which require improvement.

Secondly, research can help to identify characteristics of 'leavers'. Merton U3A does not routinely collect information on members' ages so it has not been possible, in the current research, to assess whether there is any relationship between advancing age and the decision not to renew membership. It was possible, in the current investigation, to look for gender differences in reasons for non-renewal although numbers of men are relatively small - only 29 of the 126 ex-members on whom information is presented here were male. The only notable difference between men and women was the fact that women were more likely to have moved (or to be in the process of or considering moving).

A third way in which information on reasons for non-renewal can be helpful is the provision of information on the relative importance of the different factors which lead people to decide not to renew. Without this information we might assume, for example, that a lot of people who do not renew are dissatisfied with what our organisation offers or that a lot of people are too ill to attend meetings or have died. We might not consider the possibility that a lot of people who do not renew are busy doing other things.

In fact the current research indicates that the most common reason for non-renewal is that people are otherwise occupied. In some cases, involvement in other activities may result from the failure of MU3A to meet members' needs. Non-renewers contacted by telephone were specifically asked if anything could be done to improve MU3A and those who said they were involved in other activities generally did not have criticisms of the organisation (only three of the 27 who described themselves as busy with other activities identified problems with MU3A).

Although ill health, reduced mobility and 'old age' are cited as reasons for non-renewal (20 people gave such reasons) nearly half of these indicated that they would or might rejoin either now or later and being otherwise occupied was a more frequently-cited reason for non-renewal.

Only five of those who had been members in 2013-14 and had not renewed their memberships had died (although a further three gave their partner's death as their reason for non-renewal). Thus despite the fact that U3A members are mainly retired, death was a relatively uncommon reason for non-renewal.

Some people had moved away from the MU3A area and these were nearly all women (16 women and one man). A further five felt that they lived too far away to attend meetings, and it may be that some of these had moved in the last membership year. Clearly, some of these movers may join U3As in the area to which they go, so will not be lost to the U3A movement.

Of the seven people who said they were not renewing their membership because they were not currently participating in MU3A activities, three indicated that they might rejoin in the future and one said they definitely would join in the future. Thus not all of those who stop participating in MU3A are necessarily lost to the organisation and following up these individuals may help to keep them as members.

As expected, some non-renewers had simply forgotten to renew and of these all but one said that they would definitely rejoin (a further two were unaware - despite several reminders - that their subscriptions were overdue but said either that they would definitely rejoin or that they might do so). This suggests that establishing contact with non-renewers may be worthwhile (although it remains to be seen how many of these individuals will actually renew their memberships!).

Of the 126 people included in the analysis of reasons for non-renewal, 16 identified problems with MU3A or made comments and some lessons can be learned from these. The most frequent comment related to inability to find groups or activities of interest. This is perhaps surprising, given MU3A's very wide range of interest groups. Two people had hoped to find particular groups and been disappointed. This suggests that there is room for the introduction of different groups and that this may be necessary to maintain membership numbers.

Oversubscribed groups, groups run on days people could not manage and disbanded classes were also problems for a small number of ex-members. The MU3A Groups Co-ordinator keeps waiting lists for popular groups and encourages members to set up and run their own groups, but scheduling will always depend on the availability of group leaders and venues.

The two males who indicated that they might be interested in returning to MU3A to take active roles (in one case naming specific interest groups) could usefully be followed up.

It was encouraging to note that just over a third of those who had not renewed by November 2014 said when contacted that they would or might renew their membership. Not all planned to do this immediately and it was clear that a decision not to renew membership for a given year is not necessarily a once-and-for-all-time decision. Former members may rejoin once they have recovered from temporary health problems or returned to their normal life-pattern following changes in their circumstances. Again, it appears that contacting non-renewers by telephone may be worthwhile. Recent membership research by Islington U3A supports this finding - in an online membership survey, email reminders were effective in boosting response rates (Bulford, 2014).

Conclusions

This survey has provided some useful information on people who do not renew their U3A membership. While ill health, decreased mobility and advanced age do account for some non-renewals, a substantial proportion of these individuals are likely to rejoin and being busy with other activities is a more common reason. The MU3A

Committee should be aware of the need to examine opportunities to extend the activities it offers to local third agers, bearing in mind that London U3As have to compete with many other organisations and activities for people of all ages.

It was encouraging that so many of those who had not renewed their memberships said they would or might do so, and this suggests that it could be worthwhile continuing to send invitations to rejoin to these non-renewers, perhaps for a year after their membership lapses.

It is also clear that it is worthwhile to make telephone contact with non-renewers, not only to establish their reasons for non-renewal, but also to remind those who have simply forgotten that their subscription is due.

Keeping a careful check on groups that are oversubscribed and encouraging members to set up their own groups where it is clear there is an unmet demand could help to keep members who join MU3A with the intention of joining specific interest groups - both this survey and the MU3A full membership survey (Salvage and Mott 2013) indicated that a small but important proportion of people who join MU3A do so with the intention of joining a particular group and these people may go elsewhere if they find that there are no places available. Those who show interest in leading groups should be approached with a view to taking advantage of their skills and knowledge.

In discussions relating to the underrepresentation of men in MU3A, the idea that the preponderance of women could be self-perpetuating was raised (perhaps men were put off on finding that many groups had few or no men). The current research does not support this idea - none of the men asked about their reasons for deciding not to renew their membership gave this as a reason for leaving the organisation. Men do predominate or have equal representation with women in some groups (e.g. Racketball, Greek Playreading, Current Affairs, and Table Tennis) and MU3A will continue to seek to provide activity groups which will be of special interest to men.

References

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