

# ***Engaging Students through Extracurricular Programmes: A Virtual Platform in the COVID-19 Era.***

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## **Abstract.**

This case study of our collective response as staff and students engaged in extracurricular activities is a vital contribution to the understanding of student life in the COVID-19 era. First, we introduce our extracurricular programmes. We then position our work within the context of COVID-19 and our response - utilising and enhancing an established virtual platform. We argue extracurricular activities can continue to thrive in the virtual environment providing benefits for students and staff alike. To illustrate this, we offer two personal vignettes from staff and students at NUI Galway, concluding with the opportunities and challenges of a virtual platform.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Extracurricular; Virtual platform; Volunteering.

## **1. Introduction.**

As the winter wind settled across Galway in December 2019, the NUI Galway campus gathered for the launch of a new Strategic Plan with great excitement and anticipation (NUI Galway, 2019). Within three months of these celebrations the campus community significantly responded to the emerging health and social context of the COVID-19 emergency (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). This case study of our collective response as staff and students engaged in extracurricular activities is a vital contribution to the understanding of student life in the COVID-19 era. First, we introduce our extracurricular programmes. We then position our work within the context of COVID-19 and our response - utilising and enhancing an established virtual platform. We argue extracurricular activities can continue to thrive in the virtual environment providing benefits for students and staff alike. To illustrate this we offer one staff and one student vignette at NUI Galway that speak to discovering and embracing new ways of engaging and being. The accounts describe the use of this platform in facilitating a range of online activities

in the context of COVID-19. We conclude this article with a discussion on opportunities for virtual platforms and challenges envisioned.

## **2. Extracurricular Engagement.**

Students volunteer and participate through a rich variety of local community or charity programmes and campus initiatives, including societies, clubs, mentoring and student government, among others. These initiatives are supported by campus staff, dedicated to training and recognising student time and skills development (McIlrath & Tansey, 2013). The programmes are supported through national networks to share best practice, further research, celebrate student achievement, and influence policy. These networks include the Board of Irish Societies (BICS), StudentVolunteer.ie (which is hosted by Campus Engage at the Irish Universities Association), Sports Ireland, and the Union of Students of Ireland (USI). Extensive scholarly work on student volunteering experiences and motivations demonstrate the wider range of personal, professional, civic and community benefits to supporting meaningful student programmes with higher education (Holdsworth, 2010; Holdsworth & Quinn 2010; Holdsworth & Brewis, 2014). At a time when physical interaction is restricted due to COVID-19 it is important that extra-curricular activities continue to thrive and facilitate social connection for students in the virtual world.

## **3. A Virtual Platform.**

NUI Galway has a bespoke shared online space to enable student engagement entitled *YourSpace*. *YourSpace* was initially designed in 2009 to support the administration of student extracurricular activities and empower students to manage their personal information and memberships. The development of extracurricular engagement at NUI Galway has faced very few challenges, with high numbers of opportunities, events and participation each year. The addition of *YourSpace* to the extracurricular environment has, however, enabled students and staff to better manage their activities, thus facilitating deeper levels of participation and engagement. Staff and students collectively reflect on and discuss the development of *YourSpace* annually. Key to our reflective process, as pioneers in an all-inclusive extracurricular platform, is the Student Projects Fund programme at NUI Galway. This fund is managed by students and staff to finance and nurture cross campus collaboration, maintaining the student experience at the forefront.

Overall there are three levels of user-experience within *YourSpace*: a staff user, a leadership user, and a student user. *YourSpace* is capable of being adapted and developed by each programme while maintaining continuity in design and user experience through one portal. We have achieved this in working together across a wide variety of units within and outwith the university, steadfastly anchoring all our work to one online space, rather than confusing students with different systems and sites. A leadership user is a student that has a management role through student unions, societies, clubs, peer-assisted learning, or mentoring. It is vital to have a leadership user level within *YourSpace* to ensure student voluntary empowerment and action.

The following vignettes share the experiences of two users and their reflections on the impact of COVID-19. *YourSpace* was actively in place before COVID-19, which allowed staff and students to continue to communicate and hold events in an established and user-friendly virtual environment during lockdown. The further adaptation of *YourSpace* in response to COVID-19 has created a comprehensive tool for extracurricular activities in the new reality. This growth and development is shared here by Anna and Ríona.

### **3.1 Student experience – Anna.**

As an Undergraduate student in the BSc Financial Mathematics and Economics programme I am an active participant in extracurricular activities at NUI Galway. I find *YourSpace* great as a one-stop shop for everything from joining societies and clubs to applying for the Employability and ALIVE awards, to checking who my class representatives are. As a member of the Photosoc and Ladies Hockey Club committees it is great to be able to add members, track attendance, book rooms and organise online and in-person events and training in one place. Working as a student intern with the NUI Galway Employability Award this year, I have found *YourSpace* helpful for answering students' questions and advising them on the next steps because it is easy to track their progress towards the award. I have been really impressed by how well extracurricular activities have transitioned to online. It will be challenging not to be able to do much in person but I am looking forward to finding new and creative ways to organise events, communicate and experience the fun side of university through *YourSpace*.

### 3.2 Staff experience – Ríona.

As the Societies Officer I manage over 120 societies, with over 1000 students on committees with over 13,000 members and we host over 3000 events annually. Within *YourSpace*, student and staff administration is supported in a societies dashboard which allows the student society committees and the society staff administrative team to manage membership, events, health and safety, training, equipment, webstore, finances, awards, digital badges, communication by mail and text and weekly e-zine which feeds into a vibrant website.

The Societies office (SocsBox) is situated in the centre of the student building. Societies regularly visit us for support, so in response to COVID-19 we created the SocsBox Live programme, which ran from March to June. This was through live video chats and a weekly ‘Socs Big Meeting’. The societies organised virtual AGM’s and elected committees for the coming year and ran an array of virtual events using a variety of platforms. We organised an online Society Awards, we supported the committees through the virtual national awards application process and presented at the BICS Virtual National Awards which were Live Streamed from Athlone. This event was a huge success with students streaming live on the evening accepting their awards, with their friends and families in both virtual and in-person parties. The atmosphere was electric and despite the circumstances it was a very memorable occasion for all involved (BICS, 2020).

After the disappointment of having to cancel many events due to COVID-19, including two of Ireland’s largest intervarsities, we turned our efforts into a positive challenge, bringing our Summer Festival online this year (NUI Galway Events, 2020). We knew what we would learn from this experience and the skills we would acquire would be invaluable for the coming academic year. *YourSpace* facilitated communication with students, staff and the organising committees. The festival included visual art, music, theatre, social, gaming and film. All of our events received excellent feedback and we discovered that virtual can be exciting and engaging. We experienced creating purely virtual promotional work for the first time and our press releases were picked up by local and national news outlets, one described our programme as ‘an exciting virtual festival’ and ‘an excellent programme’ (This is Galway, 2020).

When the academic year started we increased the capabilities of *YourSpace* to help organise the student on and off campus first-year orientation programme. We added a new e-learning platform and created a COVID-19 health declaration application which will be useful when we restart on campus activity, this teamed with a tool for students to register for events and have their attendance tracked will help us reintroduce in-person activity safely. We integrated a new capability in the calendar function which allows all the staff users to create events and choose a video or chat platform. The links are made available when students log-in and appear in their *YourSpace* personal calendar, addressing the challenge of open links vulnerable to hacking. We created a virtual booth within each society profile page which allowed us to create a fun interactive Societies Day. The impact has been over 2500 new students have joined societies in the first month of the 2020/2021 academic year. Furthermore the students on the society committees have run 121 virtual events in four weeks. We run a virtual help desk and virtual society training. We have been successful in keeping channels of communication open among the team with the society committees and the wider student population. The feedback from the students on the new look *YourSpace* and the support provided to the societies have gone a long way in keeping them motivated and empowered.

The learning experiences for our Societies Office staff team has been invaluable. The team has acquired the skills to work under pressure, all from our own homes and to deliver to a high standard. We have created ways in which we can still feel a sense of belonging to a team, while geographically separated, this is a very important aspect to nurture for any team engaging virtually. Having spent months working directly with the student societies and the wider student population, we know that virtual is not the same as in person, but this does not mean it cannot connect and build communities and give birth to glorious moments of creativity.

In response to COVID-19 we have escalated the development work on the platform as detailed by Anna and Ríona's lived experience with tremendous impact. For the academic year 2020/2021 the *YourSpace* platform has been developed from an independent site designed for asynchronous communication, to a location for in-real-time conversations and interactions with connections to video calls and chat groups.

## 4. Opportunities and Challenges of Virtual Extracurricular Engagement Platform.

The aim to provide student support in a virtual context has many opportunities including having an impact on retention (MacNeela & Gannon, 2014). In the context of the restrictions imposed by COVID-19, this platform has allowed incoming first-year students to make friends, join groups and connect virtually.

NUI Galway has embraced *YourSpace* as the extracurricular platform for student activities and we have integrated new functionality in the existing calendar to ease the organisation of virtual events, like pre-registering for campus orientation. As well as track attendance at all subsequent in-person events in line with our campus COVID-19 protocol.

Staff and students have different digital capacities and *YourSpace* is designed and built to be a user-friendly, intuitive tool. Our vision is for students to engage with *YourSpace* for all of their extracurricular non-formal learning experiences just as *BlackBoard* is the tool for curricular resources (Schugurensky & Mündel, 2005). As well as supporting the practicalities of our programmes to thrive in a COVID- 19 era, *YourSpace* provides a prosperous avenue for research opportunities to progress our understanding of student engagement (Tansey & Gallo, 2018).

## 5. Conclusion.

Extracurricular programmes cannot be left behind in our new realities and must form part of the campus adaptations for student success. We have extensive evidence on the impacts and benefits of extracurricular student engagement to the student experience. The success of these events based on the aforementioned positive feedback and staff and student shared vignettes demonstrates that extracurricular activities can continue to thrive in an online environment. A bespoke online platform has allowed us in NUI Galway, to provide for rich engagement that is safe and structured. Both our institutional response and our national collaborations with student engagement networks demonstrates the commitment of students and staff to embracing virtual platforms and building extracurricular opportunities and communities online.

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