

## ABSTRACT

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### StudentVolunteer.ie: Students, systems and stakeholders for social change

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#### **Abstract:**

This practice paper charts the two-year journey to the launch of StudentVolunteer.ie, an online student civic engagement platform in Ireland. As one of the first national student volunteering platforms worldwide, StudentVolunteer.ie matches students with volunteering opportunities towards impact and change for communities. Civic education through volunteering at third level is aimed at young people and involves building their awareness on ethics, social justice, human rights, sustainability and global citizenship. Students consistently express an appetite to create social change and to be involved in their communities. However, research indicates that a lack of time and other structural barriers to engagement and an inability to access meaningful episodic community volunteering roles (Brewis, Russell, & Holdsworth, 2010). Students are particularly vulnerable to nonparticipation, or a perceived apathy, as they often study away from home in new communities and engagement pushes them outside their immediate social and academic circles (Holdsworth & Brewis, 2014). The centralised StudentVolunteer.ie system and design was informed by expert stakeholders from Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and civic society organisations (CSOs).

Students can see their fellow students engaged, thereby creating a normalising effort to address social inequalities, human rights, marginalisation, environmental degradation, disability rights, and mental health campaigns. Voluntary work is an opportunity for students to realise personal and professional benefits. Uniquely StudentVolunteer.ie does more than match students to civic opportunities, it prompts student learning to reflect beyond the surface level of social challenges

and problems. The platform aims to play a vital role in supporting students to come to terms with the social problems they encounter, guiding student reflection and learning, not just simply placing students in community, as Holdsworth and Quinn (2012) warn against the danger of volunteering reproducing an uncritical status quo that perpetuates social injustice. Students are challenged to see the social challenges in their communities and reimagine social constructs through social change through the online portfolio tools and resources. This paper demonstrates how StudentVolunteer.ie was realised as a social change initiative through stakeholder partnership, embedded in institutional systems and promoted to maximise student engagement.

**Most important references:**

Brewis, G., Russell, J., & Holdsworth, C. (2010). Bursting the bubble: students, volunteering and the community report. The National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement and Institute for Volunteering Research.

Holdsworth, C., & Brewis, G. (2014). Volunteering, choice and control: a case study of higher education student volunteering. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(2), 204-219.

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StudentVolunteer.ie Web site (2015).