

University of Galway

The **University of Galway** engages with the diaspora in more ways than might first be obvious from the outside. What this case study shows is not one single diaspora model, but a wide and evolving ecosystem of connection across the university.

In **alumni relations**, the emphasis is very clearly on sustained connection over time with graduates. The University's current approach is focused on building relationships steadily, creating opportunities for reconnection, and supporting volunteers to keep local momentum going between official visits. As Catherine Conroy, Alumni Relations Manager, put it, "*small consistent engagement builds stronger long-term relationships.*" Annual alumni events in London and New York have shown strong appetite for that kind of connection, while the University is now working to establish more structured local chapter activity in key diaspora cities. The intention is not just social. These networks can support mentoring, advocacy, philanthropy and student engagement, while also helping graduates abroad retain a sense of belonging to the University and to the West of Ireland

CASE STUDY



There's not one single diaspora model, but a wide and evolving ecosystem of connection across the university.

Photo courtesy of Professor Chaosheng Zhang, University of Galway.

Fiona Neary, Innovation Accelerator & Start Up Manager, adds another, more commercially focused layer to that picture. Fiona works in the university's **technology transfer and innovation office**, where the core work involves commercialisation, patents, spin-outs, high-potential start-ups, industry collaboration and regional development.

Diaspora engagement is not the centre of that role, but it comes into view when the conversation turns to external investment, international reach and the wider networks that Irish alumni and diaspora might bring. Fiona is clear that there is real potential there, particularly when it comes to commercial leads, scaling opportunities and access to international markets. But she is equally clear that the University and the region need more purposeful structures around that work. As she puts it, *“we’ve outgrown ourselves when it comes to being able to support ourselves.”*

What makes this case especially interesting is the breadth of Fiona’s perspective. She is not only talking about the University. She is talking about Galway and the wider region, and about the gap between strong international interest and the local conditions needed to sustain it. She speaks very openly about the fact that people want to come to Galway, study there, invest there and stay connected to it, but that the region is not always in a position to make the most of that interest, *“We’re fantastic. People want to come to Galway... but I just think we’re not giving them the best service.”*

Imirce is a research infrastructure project located in the University Library. It collects, preserves and shares through an online database the voices of Irish emigrants through letters, memoirs and other personal writings. The project grew out of the life’s work of Kerby A. Miller, the leading historian of Irish emigration to North America and author of *Emigrants and Exiles* (1985). Over many years, Miller gathered and transcribed emigrant letters and memoirs and when he retired, the case was made that these letters had been sent to Ireland and that an Irish university should be involved in curating the collection and making it available to researchers. The University of Galway, in the region of Ireland most defined by emigration since the time of the Famine, was an ideal institution to rise to this challenge. Miller agreed, donating the material to the University on the understanding that it would be made freely available in an online database and that the work of collection and transcription would continue, further expanding the database. That became the Imirce Project.

At one level, Imirce is a **research infrastructure project**, a digital archive built to support historians, literary scholars and others working on migration, but in practice it has become something much bigger. By making emigrant writing freely available online, it gives people a way to connect with the lived experience of emigration through the words of those who left, the families they wrote to, and the places they carried with them. As historian Breandán Mac Suibhne, one of the project directors, puts it, *“it’s a resource for people to use”* and once it is out there, *“people grasp it and engage with it.”*

What makes Imirce especially interesting is the kind of diaspora engagement it creates. It is not a formal membership scheme or an outreach programme.

Some engagement happens through talks and events at home and abroad, explaining the project and encouraging people to contribute letters sent to and from Ireland and to see the archive as something that belongs to them. Members of the Imirce team have presented at events around Ireland and, in the USA, in Philadelphia, Wilkes-Barre and Hazleton, PA, Chicago, IL, and New York. But most engagement happens organically with the material used by family historians, artists, researchers and people simply interested in migration and Ireland. Breandán sees the project as taking on “a life of its own.” For example, Irish artist, Domino Whisker, on her own initiative, completed a series of works based on material from the archive which was subsequently exhibited in a leading gallery in Manhattan.

A key strength of the project is that it connects people not just to “Ireland” in general, but to specific places and migration routes. Breandán speaks strongly about the need to link the places people left with the places to which they went—Donegal, Derry and Tyrone with Pennsylvania, Galway with Pittsburgh and Boston, and so on. For him, these place-based connections are more meaningful than trying to connect to the diaspora through organisations once important to Irish American communities such as labour unions, church and fraternal organizations, and the Democratic party. *“Many of those organizations are not as Irish as they once were. You need something imaginative and inventive to hook on to”,* he says. Imirce is one such hook, allowing people of Irish descent to connect *“in a very real way with the place that their forebears left behind.”*

What has worked well is that the project offers something meaningful rather than making a direct ask. *“The shakedown doesn’t work,”* Breandán says. What does work is putting something into the world that people can value, a resource, a story, a genuine way of connecting. The project has attracted support from the University, the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and smaller donors including the Galway Association of New York. The challenge is capacity. Much of the work still depends on a very small number of people. He is clear about what would make the biggest difference: a project manager who could help sustain outreach, collaboration and growth over time. Looking ahead, the project has clear next steps, including the launch of an anthology of emigrant letters in the autumn, edited by Kerby Miller with an introduction by Breandán, and a major event on Ellis Island in spring 2027. Beyond that, Breandán sees real potential in genealogy, visual art and music as new ways of deepening diaspora connection. What Imirce shows is that a carefully built archive can resonate far beyond academia.

With the right support, it could become an even stronger bridge between places in Ireland and people of Irish descent across North America.

