

Project title: Roosevelt Study Center Scheme. Research Informed Teaching, Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF)

Project team

Organised and run by Dr Simon Topping, lecturer in History and Subject Leader for American Studies, in association with staff at the centre.

Summary of the aims of the project

This project aimed to give American Studies and History students experience of archival research at one of Europe's foremost American history archives. Plymouth is, as far as I am aware, the only university in Europe, and certainly the only one in the UK, to have this kind of agreement with the RSC. The scheme was open to second year American Studies students taking fieldwork modules (AMST204 and 205) and American Studies and History third year dissertation students. Each student had to come up with a viable project, which involved consultations with me and RSC staff, after using the centre's website to identify the resources which would be needed for the project to be successful. It is worth emphasising that ordinarily the RSC is only open to postgraduate and academic researchers, but the management of the centre were persuaded as to the value of the link with Plymouth (which has featured on its website).

Methods used

Having created workable projects and prepared for the trip by carrying out as much secondary research in Plymouth as possible, the students went to Middelburg to continue their research. At the RSC the students were briefed by archivists and academics and assisted in locating the correct resources. They were granted the same access to materials as postgraduate or academic visitors and learnt how to use finding aids, resource catalogues, microfilm readers and printers, PDF printers as well as the extensive traditional holdings of the centre's library.

Number of students involved

Plymouth's link with the RSC actually pre-dated the award of the TQEF grant. Two students and one member of staff, associate lecturer Dr Kris Allerfeldt, won the RSC's own grants in early 2006, and their success at the centre (Dr Allerfeldt published an article based on his research while one of the students received a first class mark for his project) demonstrated the viability and usefulness of the link. Another student funded her own trip in late 2006, shortly before the TQEF grant was awarded.

Eight students have gone to the centre over the lifetime of TQEF funding. Of these, two have received first class marks for work derived from the research they undertook, another received the highest mark in his year group for his project, while a further two are currently completing dissertations which stand every chance of receiving first class marks.

Findings/ outcomes/ impacts

In September 2008 I was able to spend a week at the centre where I did some research for an article I am writing and also gave a talk on the imminent American presidential election to students and staff at the nearby Roosevelt Academy. Links between the RSC and the University of Plymouth will be further cemented in May

2009 when one of the historians in residence at the centre, Dr Giles Scott-Smith, will be giving a plenary lecture at the south-west British Association for American Studies (BAAS) conference to be held in Plymouth.

The Plymouth-Roosevelt Study Center link has been enormously successful. Each student who has gone to the centre has thoroughly enjoyed the experience and each has benefitted academically. Comments from the students have been extremely positive:

“My interests lay in American foreign policy and, specifically, the escalation of the Vietnam War. Although the University’s library was useful for finding secondary sources, it had a limited amount of primary sources related to this theme. I was fortunate enough to win a grant from the University’s American Studies Department to conduct further research at the Roosevelt Centre, the Netherlands.

The Roosevelt Centre contained numerous invaluable resources which definitely enhanced the quality of my dissertation. The primary sources available at the Centre are not readily available anywhere else and without these, I feel that I would not have reached my full potential when researching and writing my dissertation. Furthermore, the generosity of the University in funding the trip was brilliant as otherwise I would have been unable to go. I hope that the University continues to support the partnership with the Centre – the staff at the Centre are extremely supportive and knowledgeable and were a great help in finding relevant material.”

Luke Graham, graduate in American Studies and American Studies Dissertation Prize winner, 2008

“During my time at the RSC I used as many sources as I could in the time permitted, relating to my dissertation on Harry Hopkins. The eminent New Dealer, politician, and foreign emissary to FDR, was well catalogued at the center and made for an ideal research topic. Throughout the week, I went through as many of the relevant 27 microfilms on the individual as I could, as well as access the New York Times Newspaper via internet connection and books in the main study room.

The RSC staff were a pleasure to work alongside, very friendly and very accommodating. The overall atmosphere was also very relaxed, whereas the sources were largely informative. In terms of an overall experience, I have to commend the center for its usefulness, and the town of Middelburg for its easy-going beauty. For any student or academic looking to find the edge with their studies, the RSC is definitely worth checking out. I cannot fault it.”

Thomas Humphrey, graduating in History, 2009

“The opportunity to travel to Holland to do some extensive research for my project was great. At the centre, I was able to use the library and the collection of reels on Bethune, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Black Cabinet. During the five days that I spent working in the centre, I found the staff to be very helpful, and I was able to do more than enough research for my project. The centre had a wide range of resources and I felt extremely pleased with the work I had accomplished. I really believe that the trip made all the difference to my project, which I did very well in. The whole experience; from the travelling to the researching, was unforgettable and really beneficial to myself and my work.”

Jenna Larcombe, graduating in American Studies, 2009

“Whilst visiting the Roosevelt Study Centre in Middleburg I looked at Fiorello LaGuardia, and how he helped New York City out of the Depression. Once I arrived at the centre and began to look through the resources that were available to me and I adapted my topic to suit this, as originally I was going to look into how the Great Depression affected New York City and its people.

The Centre provided excellent primary and secondary resources which I could not get hold of in the UK.

Going to the Roosevelt Study Centre was an opportunity that I am very pleased I took, as I feel that it helped me to prepare for research that I will carry out in the future.“

Leah Baker, graduating in American Studies, 2009

The assistant director of the RSC Hans Krabbendam is fulsome in his praise of the scheme, noting that it has even changed the way the centre approaches undergraduate scholars and has acted as an example which other universities are keen to follow.

“Since the RSC has a particularly rich collection of historical files, we would welcome the continuation of the TQEF program that has developed in the past years. The visits of the highly motivated Plymouth students have encouraged the RSC to invest more in undergraduate students. The RSC staff has enjoyed helping the students prepare and conduct their research, familiarizing them with the challenges and solutions of doing primary research. It has been a pleasure to see those students grow excited about using original sources for their assignments in American history. The results of their research trips have been incorporated into the RSC holdings. In addition, these visits have strengthened the bonds between the RSC and the history department at the University of Plymouth. This successful program has inspired other institutions to explore the possibilities of setting up similar arrangements.

We are looking forward to a continuation of this fruitful program and will welcome all students back to Middelburg.”

Hans Krabbendam

The RSC link was created with American Studies students in mind, however, with the closure of this degree programme and my transfer to History it will become part of History provision. Colleagues in History are extremely keen to see the scheme continued and one History student has already been to the centre. Our unique link to the RSC is mentioned at open days and generates a great of interest from both prospective students and their parents and is clearly a very good marketing tool. I think that it is also worth emphasising that colleagues from other universities have expressed a degree of envy about this co-operation while the outgoing external for American Studies, Nick Selby of UEA, has praised its innovation.

Continuation/ dissemination plans

A request for the renewal of the RSC link will be submitted under the auspices of History in the forthcoming round of TQEF bids. It is likely that if this bid is successful that the scheme will become even more successful not only because it will be open to far more students but also due to the existing popularity of US topics among History undergraduates. As well as the grants for the students, the bid will factor in a public lecture as part of an ongoing History or Peninsula arts series by one of the senior scholars at the centre. The link has proved invaluable to the students who have participated in it. Each of those involved has produced work of a high standard and most have produced their best work as a result of their time at the RSC. The scheme encourages learning independence among students, gives them responsibility for their research and projects and allows them unprecedented access to some of the best possible resources on American history; indeed, nowhere in the UK could provide the kind of primary materials our students can examine at the RSC. It gives the students a unique experience of archival research and I do not think that it is coincidental that at least four of those who have gone to the centre have done, or will be doing, postgraduate degrees.