

Heritage Collections Research Summer School

Keywords: Undergraduate Research, Heritage, Humanities

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RCSI
UNIVERSITY
OF MEDICINE
AND HEALTH
SCIENCES

Library
Research Summer School

2023



Figure 1 - Megan Tiew, MED Year 2, Research Summer School Participant

Introduction

RCSI Library is continuously seeking to increase awareness of and engagement with RCSI's Heritage Collections with new and diverse audiences. One way the Library team has been exploring this is by connecting with the RCSI undergraduate student population through the Research Summer School (RSS). The RSS is an annual program offered to RCSI undergraduate students that introduces the student to a research environment in a respective field, usually biomedical or clinical in nature. The Heritage Collections team saw the RSS program as an opportunity for the undergrad students to engage with RCSI's historical collections via a Humanities based research project.

Initiative

The goal is to offer RCSI undergraduate students an opportunity to work on a Humanities based research project primarily using RCSI's rich and historical Heritage Collections. There were two projects offered in 2022/23:

1. To research and explore the significance, symbolism and story of a series of portrait paintings of important figures from RCSI's history and history of Irish surgery and medicine.
2. To bring historical perspective to our contemporary understanding of gender equality in RCSI by shedding light on the growing numbers and increasing influence of women within the student and staff populations of RCSI during the period 1960-2000.

Two undergraduate students successfully applied through the RSS platform - one Year 2 Medicine, the other a Year 2 Graduate Entry Medicine student. Under the supervision of the Heritage Collections team- Archivist and Heritage Research and Outreach officer- both students researched, analysed and investigated their respective research topic using RCSI's Heritage Collections as well as other libraries collections namely the National Gallery of Ireland and Royal Hibernian Academy.

The outputs for both projects included:

1. Short Paper (max 1500 words) summarising research findings and data.
2. Presentation (15-20 mins) to interested staff and students to communicate research findings
3. Poster with an opportunity to display in ICHAMS and RCSI Research Day

The enhancement received support from senior leaders mainly the Director of Library services. It was also supported by the RCSI Art Committee as part of their own Art Strategy goal of 'revealing and interpreting the legacy of the existing Art Collection'. The Head of RCSI's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Office supported the gender-based project and used the findings of the research work to inform and support the work carried out by the EDI team. The main challenge was trying to tap into and understand the students' capabilities. It was considered that the type of collections used, the subject matter and skills needed for the project might be quite different to their own regular studies so it was important to gauge the level the project should be pitched at. This was overcome by engaging with the student during the application process, explaining the project fully to them and talking them through what was expected from them. Each student's strengths and interests were discussed and identified with the PIs. It wasn't until this was done that the student decided they were still interested and able to commit. Also, setting out regular meetings, milestones and check-ins with the PIs from the outset was a crucial part of the project as it supported and enabled the student to reach their full potential.

Outcomes

The impact of this enhancement is two fold. Firstly, it gives the Library team the opportunity to engage with an audience that would not have been particularly exposed to RCSI's Heritage Collections before or might not have too much awareness of what the collections hold. In turn, the outputs from the project can be used by the Library in meaningful and strategic ways. Previous RSS projects have formed the basis of important RCSI Library publications, events and research work. This year's RSS students presented their work to the RCSI Library, the RCSI Art Committee and the EDI office as well as submitting a poster with an opportunity to display at RCSI Research Day and ICHAMS 2024.

Secondly, it enriches the students overall RCSI experience by giving them an opportunity to work with archival/historical material, an area that is not necessarily covered in their current healthcare-based curriculum. RCSI's history and heritage is an integral part of RCSI's identity and for an undergraduate student to be able to directly work with, research and engage with, is an invaluable experience for them and one that will stand to them in their future. 2022/23 was the fourth year for Library team to participate in the RSS initiative. Each year lessons and learnings have been taken in order to improve and finesse the project both for the students and the PI's involved. Based on the level of interest and high rates of applications from students, Heritage Collections intends to continue to participate in the RSS on annual basis.