

# **RaPSS: Research Proposal**

## **Methodology**

The methodology for this research draws on the approach used in psychological autopsy (Beskow et al, 1990) which has been applied effectively to young suicides in the United Kingdom (Houston et al, 2001). However, since this study aims to identify vulnerability factors which are accessible to HE Is and their staff, the case reviews will focus on social and psycho-social factors which are amenable to intervention. The critical incident technique (Redpath et al, 1997) is therefore also relevant to this study and this model is expected to be particularly valuable when the HEIs' responses in the aftermath of suicide are explored.

The case review transcripts, supplemented by data derived from coroners' records, will be analysed thematically using a grounded theory approach. Interviews with parents, which will be semi-structured, will be analysed separately. The use of different data sources will facilitate a pluralistic methodology which the research team (Stanley et al, 1998) have employed in previous studies. The research assistant and the lead researchers will all contribute to analysis of the data.

*Literature Review* -This review will be built upon previous work by the researchers in this field. Student suicide will be located within the literature and research on suicide which includes community studies and those studies with a mental health focus. International research which examines the impact of, and the response to, suicide within educational institutions will also be included.

*Case Studies* -A purposive sample of 40 cases of completed student suicides will be developed through the project's links with a wide range of HEIs. The sample will be constructed to reflect the range of institutions and the variations in their student populations, support services and institutional culture. Other factors used to construct the sample will include students' status, whether undergraduate or postgraduate, gender and race. In accordance with the guidance provided in *Safety First* (Appleby 2001), some cases identified as 'open verdicts' by the coroner will be included in this sample. Cases will be selected from a time-frame extending over the previous two years, but the sample will not include deaths occurring in the previous six months. This approach will allow detailed information to be available to the research team through informants' recall, but will avoid contacting those whose memories would be very recent and therefore particularly distressing.

Agreement to undertake the research will be negotiated with key personnel in HEIs. Tape-recorded interviews, based on a semi-structured schedule, will be completed with individuals within HEIs representing a variety of perspectives on the event. These will include other students, academic staff, student support and other relevant personnel. Outside the institution, interviews will be undertaken with those parents or relatives who have agreed to be interviewed. Interpreters may be required for interviews with family members from minority ethnic groups and for interviews undertaken in Wales. In such cases, specialist freelance workers will be employed to assist the research assistant.

*Data from Coroners' Records* – The material collected from the interviews will be supplemented with data available from the relevant coroners' records, including evidence presented at the inquest. Initial discussions with coroners have indicated that the depositions would be available for analysis and would constitute a fruitful source of information.

*Interviews with Parents* – Since it is anticipated that there may be difficulties in interviewing parents or relatives in the case study stage of the study, an additional 20 interviews will be completed with parents whose children took their own lives as students. These parents will be contacted through PAPYRUS' membership and networks and the PAPYRUS administrator will undertake the task of identifying and contacting potential interviewees. This task will involve co-ordination and liaison with the research team.

### **Ethical Issues**

All cases and institutions will be anonymised and interviewees will be assured confidentiality. The pilot study indicated the value of the researchers being able to provide those interviewed with details of counselling services if appropriate and this research will adopt a similar 'good practice' approach. Interviewees will be given information about the research in leaflet form which will include details of support services. They will be invited to indicate whether they would like to receive a copy of the final report and other publications.

Agreement to undertake the research will be negotiated with key personnel in HEIs. In the first instance, heads of Student Support or Counselling Services will be approached by the lead researchers who have a well established network of contacts in this field developed through previous research and training initiatives.

The research will be submitted to the University's and relevant NHS ethics committees for approval. The Research Advisory Group will also be asked to provide guidance on ethical issues.