

# **RaPSS: Research Proposal**

## **Purpose and Rationale for the Research**

The purpose of this research is two-fold. Firstly, to contribute to suicide prevention in the specific context of young people and higher education. Secondly, to produce and disseminate models of good practice for those managing the response to a student suicide. This dual focus acknowledges the difficulties in targeting preventive strategies accurately and the need to include the minimisation of harm to others as part of initiatives on suicide. The project is timely in the light of the expansion of higher education and its increasing commitment to widening participation and social inclusion.

The research is congruent with government policy which emphasises the need for suicide reduction in the young population, particularly among young men (DoH, 1999 and DoH, 2002). The Department of Health has called for detailed research to be undertaken into the needs of high risk groups (DoH, 2002, p. 16) and Professor Louis Appleby has provided advice on the development of this proposal, particularly with regard to establishing aims and objectives for the research. The Suicide Prevention Strategies for both England and Scotland (DoH, 2002; Scottish Executive, 2002) have also highlighted the needs of those affected by suicide and both documents promote the development of services for these groups. *The National Suicide Prevention Strategy for England* identifies a role for POPYRUS in constructing a support pack for professionals in contact with bereaved families (DoH, 2002, p. 24) and this research will contribute to that work.

In the field of higher education, AMOSSHE (Association of Managers in Student Services in Higher Education) have drawn attention to the high levels of student mental health problems reported by student counselling services (Rana et al, 1999). A survey of students undertaken at the University of Leicester identified depressive symptoms among one in six students (Grant, 2002). Mental health problems are one of the key risk factors which can be used in developing suicide prevention strategies. However, work undertaken by the researchers (Stanley and Manthorpe, 2001a) has identified the difficulties experienced by higher education institutions (HEIs) in responding effectively to mental health problems. Some authors (Grant, 2002) have identified the shrinking resource base and increasing demands on higher education as factors which impede the ability of HEI staff to identify need and provide appropriate support for students.

Voluntary organisations, such as POPYRUS, Samaritans and Re-think (formerly the National Schizophrenia Fellowship) have also campaigned for more sensitive systems for identifying risk and responding to mental health needs among students. Accounts from former students who have personal experience of self-harm and attempted suicide (Wade, 2002; Brandon and Payne, 2002) have emphasised the importance of non-stigmatising attitudes and services in HEIs: the dissemination arm of the research will seek to promote positive attitudes towards mental health problems and seeking help among students. Parents whose children have taken their own lives (Harvey, 2002) have stressed the importance of thoughtful and sensitive communication with

families when students are experiencing mental distress and the study will address the complex issue of communication with families when young people who are in transition to independence experience a crisis.

Within the higher education sector, Universities UK and SCOP (the Standing Conference of Principals) are committed to reducing the risk of student suicide. The organisations have published joint guidelines to assist HEIs in responding to students' mental health needs (CVCP, 2000) and have undertaken a preliminary survey of HEIs to establish overall student suicide rates (Universities UK, 2002). While the report acknowledges the limitations of the evidence base established, it concludes that rates of student suicide are similar to those in the general population of young people.

### **Relevance to the Mission and Priorities of the Community Fund**

The consequences of suicide are profound and damage the quality of life in the communities affected. This research is aimed particularly at young people with mental health needs who are a high risk group for suicide and who are also in danger of being excluded from higher education. The research aims to strengthen the capacity of higher education to prevent and respond to suicide and will have a direct impact on the health and well-being of young people. It is highly relevant to the Community Fund's mission.

The study will focus on young people's social inclusion through education and will therefore target a priority group identified by the Community Fund. Its findings will be integrated into policy and practice at a number of levels by PAPHYRUS and the research team who have a strong track record in the area of dissemination. PAPHYRUS will also make full use of the research findings in its contribution to implementing the National Suicide Prevention Strategy for England.