



Mental Health
Foundation



University of South Wales KESS MRes Studentship USW MINI 21103

An evaluation of peer support groups delivering interventions and support to reduce loneliness and improve social connections for older persons living in retirement housing

Here is an **exciting opportunity** to conduct a study in a stimulating area of research i.e. loneliness and older age which could lead to entirely **new approaches** in understanding the impact that loneliness can have on the mental well-being of older people and identify what interventions can be effective in reducing its negative impact through increasing access to meaningful activities and improved social connections.

This is a **funded MRes**, including a generous **stipend and tuition fees**, with **well-resourced** circumstances for a successful scholarship.

The **selected candidate** will apply their **research and interpersonal skills and ambition** to conduct applied research with the University of South Wales and a leading Mental Health Charity. This applied research project, will allow the student to develop **transferable knowledge and skills** in this **most exciting and active field of mental health and older persons research**.

This **Knowledge Economy Skills Scholarship (KESs) project** will be held in the Faculty Life Sciences and Education at the **University of South Wales**. KESS is a programme funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) awarded by the Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO) in the Welsh Government. The MRes will be associated with the Mental Health Foundation. The project will focus on evaluating interventions such as engagement in meaningful activities delivered within peer support groups run by trained volunteers to older persons living in retirement accommodation e.g. with a housing provider or in a residential care home. The impact of these findings could potentially improve the mental well-being of older people thus, improving their quality of life in their older age. The project is backed by the Mental Health Foundation.

Company partner: The Mental Health Foundation

Background/company mission

Founded in 1949, the Mental Health Foundation is the UK's leading mental health charity working on public mental health across the life course. Our vision is "To help us all live mentally healthier lives". With prevention at the heart of what we do, we aim to find and address the sources of mental health problems focussing on mental health inequalities (the social, economic and health factors that increase the risks of developing mental health problems) and on helping people recognise and address the signs of emerging mental health problems early.

We undertake research to understand what will make a difference, and develop projects to test the most promising practices in real-life settings. Once we learn what works, we provide training, information, expert advice, and appropriate products to allow the intervention to be replicated widely. We advocate for change through the media and within government.

We help people to survive, recover from and prevent mental health problems, undertaking research, developing services, designing training, influencing policy, and raising public awareness. We tackle difficult issues and try innovative approaches, led by service users themselves. We use our findings to

provide high quality information, publications, training materials and online services for statutory, voluntary and community organisations, and for the public.

We also influence policy development, including Government at the highest level in England, Scotland, and Wales, and help tackle stigma attached to mental illness and learning disabilities. We reach millions of people every year through our project work, media coverage, information, and online services.

Programme of research:

Rationale and Background

This MRes study in partnership with the MHF will build on previous models of peer support that have been shown to meet the needs of older persons in particular the importance of maintaining mental well-being into older age. In a previous study at USW, it was found that social connections and maintaining meaningful, purposeful activity were important for older people as part of their overall well-being and to prevent, in that study, deterioration in their dementia illness.

The Standing Together Cymru Project aims to improve the emotional health and community connections of older people living in retirement housing, through delivering facilitated self-help groups with residents for periods of six months. It builds on a successful Mental Health Foundation pilot project and subsequent Big Lottery Fund funded project, both based in London, through which MHF have set up 25 peer support groups improving the well-being of people in later life. MHF/USW plan to conduct a research study to evaluate the impact of these peer support groups and to ascertain the evidence base for the interventions that the MHF plan to implement in these support groups. There are many potential positive outcomes relating to the mental well-being of older adults anticipated from these support groups. One of our areas of interest is the impact loneliness has on mental well-being and the importance of maintaining social connections as people age and experience a loss of social support through e.g. retirement, bereavement or mental health conditions.

Aim

The aim of the MRes study is, in collaboration with the Mental Health Foundation, to evaluate the impact these support groups have on the mental well-being of older adults e.g. whether they reduce loneliness/social isolation and improve social connections with their peers living in retirement housing.

Method

This will be a mixed method approach.

Literature search - To explore potential evaluation models/tools that can be effectively applied to measure the impact of the peer support groups.

Inclusion criteria

1. Older persons (aged 55 plus) living in retirement housing.
2. Are residents in retirement housing within the WWV/Convergence areas in Wales? Peer support groups will run in e.g. Ebbw Vale, Cwmtillery, Blackwood and Caerphilly.

Quantitative Methods

The chosen tool by the MHF to measure aspects of loneliness, relational connectedness, social connectedness and self-perceived isolation is the UCLA 3-item Scale. This is a widely validated scale. The tool will be administered three times pre a support group, mid-way and possibly at the end (the duration of the groups is 3-6 months).

Qualitative Methods

Focus groups with group participants (the number of groups to be agreed with the MHF). For a year project, this is likely to be no more than 3 focus groups. The purpose of the focus group will be to evaluate the process as well as the interventions that have been implemented within the group (these

will vary between groups depending on the needs of each group). They are co-produced with the participants and the volunteers facilitating the groups and may include a number of creative activities such as film, photography, poetry etc. The MHF London project and other MHF programmes have found such creative activities contribute to improved community engagement and sense of meaningful activity. This will be explored as part of this element of the study.

Studentship:

The studentship will cover the fees for a 1-year full-time MRes programme and pay a stipend of circa £11k p.a. There is also around £3k project support costs available for consumables, travel, minor equipment, training (including the KESS Grad School) and conference attendance.

The position is available from 1st October 2018

Eligibility of Student:

To be eligible to hold a KESS studentship, you must:

- have a home address in the Convergence area (details below)* **at the time of registration.**
- have the right to take up paid work in the Convergence area* on completion of the scholarship.
- be classified by the University as 'home' or 'EU' for tuition fees purposes according to the University's guidelines.
- satisfy University of South Wales's admissions criteria: see below, *qualifications and experience and application Process*

**The Convergence area covers West Wales and the Valleys, and is made up of the following 15 local authorities: Isle of Anglesey, Gwynedd, Conwy, Denbighshire, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire, Swansea, Neath Port Talbot, Bridgend, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Merthyr Tydfil, Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen.*

Qualifications and experience:

Eligible applicants will:

- Have a degree (2i or higher) in an appropriate nursing or allied profession, health/social care discipline **and/or** psychology/sociology/social science discipline.
- Possess a reasonable understanding of both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies **and/or** the well-being needs of older persons.
- Be highly self-motivated, with capacity to learn and develop applied research techniques **and/or** knowledge of/interest in working with older persons in a health or social care capacity.
- Have well-developed and positively collaborative interpersonal skills.
- Have an ability to deliver technical reports and communicate findings.
- Be willing to travel and work in community support settings.

Application Process:

To download an application package, please visit: [Participant Application Package](#)

For any queries on eligibility, please contact: KESS Team at Research and Innovation Services, University of South Wales: kess@southwales.ac.uk Tel: 01443 482578

For informal enquiries or further programme information, please contact: Dr. Anne Fothergill at: anne.fothergill@southwales.ac.uk. Tel: 01443 483017

Further information at: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk>

Closing date for applications: Friday 16th February 2018

(Interviews will be held w/c 19th February 2018)

Knowledge Economy Skills Scholarships (KESS) is a pan-Wales higher level skills initiative led by Bangor University on behalf of the HE sector in Wales. It is part funded by the Welsh Government's European Social Fund (ESF) convergence programme for West Wales and the Valleys.