

**ICT: COLLABORATION, INNOVATION & INTEGRATION**

**AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY OF  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW ICT CAREER LEARNING TOOL**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The internet provides a significant platform from which people can explore and develop their career thinking, learning and development. This thesis is an action research study of collaboratively developing an innovative ICT career learning tool to support adults with their career planning. This study is based on my real-world practice and is action research in action. Central is the importance of the adult guidance relationship in supporting individuals with their career decisions, and how ICT career tools can inform a collaborative meaning-making process. This blended approach within adult guidance offers client's more opportunities to become proactive and empowered. Career learning is not the sole responsibility or unique to the guidance relationship. The role of adult education in providing ICT career exploration opportunities within group learning is discussed. Aware that not all adults are in a position or wish to access ICT career tools, this research recognises the barriers and limitations that exist. Nonetheless, it considers the potential of ICT in the context of supporting lifelong guidance and career management skills. My reflexive learning on the research journey provides some insights for consideration in improving the integration of ICT within holistic adult guidance practice. This includes a need for further research into what the integration of ICT within adult guidance actually comprises. There is synergy in adult guidance counsellors working more closely with adult educators to increase client opportunities for upskilling, career learning and development. With the rapid growth in technologies, the provision of continuous professional development in ICT for guidance counsellors to improve their competency, knowledge and confidence levels is essential. Engagement with ICT blended with face-to-face adult guidance counselling practice is highly beneficial.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| <b>AEGI</b>  | Adult Education Guidance Initiative                        |
| <b>DSP</b>   | Department of Social Protection                            |
| <b>ELGPN</b> | European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network                  |
| <b>ICT</b>   | Information Communications Technology                      |
| <b>IGC</b>   | Institute of Guidance Counsellors in Ireland               |
| <b>LES</b>   | Local Employment Service                                   |
| <b>OECD</b>  | The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |

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# CHAPTER 1: “COMING TOGETHER”

*“Instinctively creating a world that has not yet been born” ...*

(President Michael D Higgins, 2015)

## **1.0 Introduction**

This thesis is an action research study of collaboratively developing an innovative ICT career learning tool to support adults with their career planning. In this Chapter, I provide some context to my choice of research topic, discuss how my personal and professional values have influenced it and clearly set out the aims.

Central to this study is the importance of the adult guidance relationship in supporting individuals with their career development. ICT career tools can inform this collaborative process. This blended approach within adult guidance offers client’s opportunities to become more proactive and empowered. The role of adult education in providing career learning opportunities through ICT within groups will be examined. I contest that individuals are entitled and should have ICT access to and ownership of their own career information throughout their life-long journey of career. Aware that not all adults are in a position or wish to access ICT career tools, this research recognises that barriers and limitations exist. Nonetheless, it considers the potential of ICT in the context of lifelong guidance. It is unclear from the literature I sourced of what the integration of ICT in adult guidance practice actually comprises. This indicates is a need for further research in this area particularly from an Irish perspective. Continuous professional development for guidance counsellors integrating ICT within their careers work is essential. This will improve the competency and confidence levels necessary to support and provide a more modern, blended and innovative approach to adult careers guidance in 21<sup>st</sup> century Ireland.



## **1.1 A professional and personal context**

My desire to pursue a career path as an adult guidance counsellor was strongly influenced by my adult community education and development work in West Dublin. Since 2004, I worked supporting individuals on a one-to-one and group level in adult education settings. This involved designing and developing pre-employment and training programmes for individuals who had left education prematurely. A key part of my work involved the provision of support with their progression into employment or education. I realised that to have a more in-depth understanding of this guidance work and to improve my professional experience I needed to up-skill. I pursued the Maynooth Adult Guidance and Counselling programme in 2010.

I am passionate about providing opportunities for individuals to progress in their lives despite their socio-economic circumstances. This stems from my childhood experience of witnessing the impact that unemployment had on my Father and Family. I experienced the challenges of becoming a Mother at the young age of twenty and this encouraged me to work very hard to progress in my career. I was lucky to have some important people that supported, mentored and guided me in my career development. Neary (2015, p. 15) argues that “our professional identity is...constructed of a range of experiences, both internal and external, that collectively define us as the professionals we are”. Recognising the value of guidance and support in my own life, I realise that it is by no coincidence that I chose my career path.

My adult education work is strongly rooted in community development practices. This is a process of encouraging individuals to become more active in changing their lives for the better. In the Irish Governments *White Paper on Education*, community based education and community development can be described as:

the process whereby marginalised groups formulate a process of user-driven, learner-centred and communal education...community development refers to the contribution of adult education to the development of a structural analysis and a collective sense of purpose amongst marginalised people who share common problems and who aim to become actively involved in solving these problems. (2000, p. 29)

Mezirow (2007) refers to the role of adult educators working in community development settings as concerned with encouraging learners to become more aware of their problems, participate actively and collectively try and solve them. I have seen first-hand how community education can initiate transformative learning in the lives of individuals who are very often furthest from the labour market. It offers an active and engaging space for learning, new possibilities and opportunities for positive change.

Connolly (2003, p.9) states:

Voices have been crucial in the growth and development of community education in Ireland. Community education provided a forum for listening to the voices of otherwise silenced people, it developed a process which valued the stories and enabled the participants to interrogate their own words. In addition, community education has supplied the wherewithal for disparate groups to engage with empowering processes and become active agents in their communities.

In 2011, my work changed. I moved from the community focused adult education I was accustomed to into working for the company CareersPortal.ie. The main focus of the web-based company is the provision of accessible and up-to-date ICT careers and education information and useful resources to those needing or providing career guidance (CareersPortal.ie, 2016). The website was developed as a direct response to a report generated by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007) who recommended that:

The Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment and the Department of Education & Science should explore the feasibility of developing a central Irish careers portal or coordinated gateway site. This would contain information on careers, courses and the labour market, organisational/company profiles, a range of assessment tools and testimonials, a guidance helpline and appropriate linkages to related sites. (EGFSN, 2007, p. 130)

The site has become an integral tool for guidance professionals throughout Ireland. It is supported by both public and private organisations, towards the dissemination of the most update information about careers and courses across all sectors of the economy. CareersPortal.ie has grown hugely, both in content, and in its user base since its launch in 2008.



Figure 1: CareersPortal Website: retrieved on-line: 9<sup>th</sup> June 2016: from [www.careersportal.ie](http://www.careersportal.ie).

## 1.2 “Micro meets macro” – a broader professional perspective

In the beginning, working for CareersPortal posed somewhat of a dilemma for me. The focus of my work became less concerned with a grass roots, localised or *micro approach* I was familiar with. I began working with a much broader audience. My work includes the provision of one-to-one career guidance counselling, delivering nationwide training on the best use of the website and associated schools based *REACH+* second level career and college preparation programme. I develop career guidance resources and information for use with adult learners and jobseekers. I work closely with second level guidance counsellors, organisations and services who provide support, information and guidance to students and adults with their career and education planning and decisions. My work has given me opportunities to attend national forums that inform policy discussions and developments. I work with guidance counsellors, educators and organisations across the sectors in Ireland. This has afforded me having a more *macro* or bigger picture perspective of career information

and guidance provision in Ireland. I bring with me my experience of working in areas of disadvantage into my current role. In particular, when designing training programmes for staff from various organisations that support the unemployed, I am mindful of the emotional, financial and self-esteem issues that not working can create. As the opening quote indicates this is instinctive to me. It reflects my experience growing up, my grass-roots work with those experiencing disadvantage in their lives, and an understanding of the practical career guidance training staff need. I have integrated both my adult guidance and education philosophies into my current practice.

### **1.3 Background to my choice of research topic**

In October 2012, I undertook a consultation process with representatives from twenty-two organisations and services. All involved support adult learners and job seekers with their career progression. At that time, many of them assumed that the CareersPortal website was for second-level school students. I presentation the websites' resources from an adult perspective. I consulted with them on their needs and what further career resources might support them in their work. This was a process of critical collaboration and consisted of verbal and anonymous written feedback. It proved a tangible way to build strong and positive working relationships and explored new improved ways of providing careers information to adults. Many of the proposed improvements have been successfully developed. This included a rebuilding of the homepage to highlight adult learner and jobseeker. I have been involved in developing and maintaining these two communities (Figure 1, p. 4).

Feedback has continued to highlight a need for more centralised and easy accessible career resources for adult learners and jobseekers. The company's REACH+ programme is operating since 2009 and provides a centralised career file within the website for second-level senior cycle students in Ireland. REACH+ is a comprehensive career and college preparation programme available for students in Transition Year, 5<sup>th</sup> Year and 6<sup>th</sup> Year in Irish second level schools. It is a blended programme; workbook and ICT based. It is mobile compatible and the "on-line career file" can be accessed by students from any mobile device (REACH+, 2016). From a guidance counsellor perspective, they can access, track and review their students' career information and

use this to support their guidance practice. The programme is developed in response to the needs of the second-level school guidance counsellor community and is shaped by an advisory group of guidance practitioners. Although CareersPortal provides a free ICT career-file for adults to use, this cannot be accessed by professionals supporting them. It integrates with the website resources and proves a useful resource. Feedback from those using it with adults has highlighted a need for a more centralised career file for adults that can be viewed and provides additional features. To address this an advisory group of staff was formed from one geographical area in September 2015. These representatives provide information, advice, guidance and training to assist adults with their career development. Those involved included the Department of Social Protection (DSP), Local Employment Services (LES), Adult Guidance Education Initiative (AEGI) and Youthreach (Appendix 1) and two staff members (myself included) from CareersPortal.

#### **1.4 The influence of my values on this study**

Listening to the experiences and knowledge of others is important and influential in my work. I value dialogue and feedback in the hope that current practices, systems and resources can be improved. I am aware that this has implications in terms of me bringing my own beliefs to this study, and these have shaped my choice of topic and methodology. Creswell (2003, p. 182) describes this as how the researcher filters through their “personal lens” and that “the personal-self becomes the researcher-self. It represents honesty and openness to research, acknowledging that all enquiry is laden with values”. I have discussed how my personal and professional experiences have shaped my professional identity. This in turn has translated and permeated my role as a *researcher* and the action research methodological approach used. As a guidance counsellor and an adult educator, I continue to seek out ways to work from an adult and community education philosophy.

**Adult and Community Education** can be defined as:

A process of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect and collective consciousness. It is within the community and of the community, reflecting the developing needs of individuals and their locale. It builds the capacity of local communities to engage in developing responses to educational and structural disadvantage and to take part in decision-making and policy-formation within the community. It is distinct from general Adult Education provision, due both to its ethos and to the methodologies it employs. (AONTAS 2000, p. 6)

The opportunity to undertake a *real-world study into my practice* of collaborating with others to create new improved career tool was of genuine interest to me. The idea that it might be helpful to marginalised adults excited me. I recognise that in Ireland, adult's career information is often stored in a fragmented way by service providers linked in with for career support. CareersPortal provides a very useful free ICT career file but it has limited accessibility and features. Some universities in Ireland such as Dublin City University provide learners with a means to store their career information in an electronic portfolio. This can be accessed by their career advisers during their studies. "All DCU students have access to their own personal ePortfolio through Loop. This allows students keep track of their personal, professional and academic development throughout the course of their studies and beyond" (DCU website, 2016). However, these type of "ePorfolios" are not generally available for adults to use in collaboration with support staff in Ireland and have potential to assist with career management skills throughout lifelong guidance.

### **1.5 Aims and objectives of this study**

- This action research thesis focuses on tracking the process of developing a new ICT career learning tool in collaboration with a group of professionals. These are staff who support adult learners and jobseekers in their career decisions and development. I refer to this group as the *advisory group*.
- Central to this process will be an exploration of the action taken and my reflections throughout the research journey.
- I will review relevant literature in terms of ICT and adult guidance theory and practice.

- The research findings will be examined in the context of career learning, development and management from an adult education and guidance perspective.
- A summary of key points emerging from my reflexive learning journey will be highlighted for consideration in relation to the broader implications for adult guidance practice.

### **1.6 The MEd – an academic, personal and professional journey**

My motivation to embark on the Masters programme was driven by my positive experience of undertaking the adult guidance and counselling qualification in Maynooth. I felt that I had found a professional fit; a vocation. This presented me with a new-found personal and professional confidence in my life. I have had the privilege to present workshops and module inputs on *ICT tools in the adult guidance practice* at conferences attended by guidance practitioners in Ireland. This involves me offering some expertise in this area. Therefore, specialising in this particular field through undertaking research in the MEd is valuable to me personally and professionally. Action research is a very practical way of identifying an issue and collaborating with others in an attempt to address it. This fits well with my style of working and professional identity. Action research like all research is not without its challenges. It is a methodological approach usually studied over time. Often, I worried about the MEd timeframe of just nine months. At times the research felt a *messy* process and difficult to explain. “Research conducted in the real world – as opposed to the textbook – is that it is a messy, human affair: if it is not, then it is time to worry. For nothing goes as planned, all rules have to be broken, all stages merge with each other” (Plummer, 2001, p.5). Despite the unpredictable nature of action research, it proved to be a real and practical means of researching and afforded me tangible ways of applying theory to my practice.

## CHAPTER 2: “WORKING TOGETHER”

*“We live through experiences, rather than in them.*

*And we can’t live in anyone else’s. That’s the great puzzle: none of us will ever know what it’s like to be anyone else.”*

(Oakley, 2000, p. 8)

### 2.0 Introduction

I have provided some context and background information on why I chose my action research topic. This chapter sets out the methodological approach adopted and how as a *researcher*, I positioned myself within three action research typologies. The practical nature of an action research study will be discussed and the impact of this on the methods used. Included will be ethical considerations and informed consent associated with the research. The challenges and limitations of this study will be stated for further discussion in the Chapter 4.

### 2.1 Qualitative research as real-world research

Robson (1993, p. 42) refers to the fact that “all enquiry is concerned with contributing to knowledge. Real world enquiry also commonly seeks a potential usefulness in relation to policy and practice”. Research in the real world is concerned with studying real-life situations and issues. I chose my research topic because it was something live and tangible in my practice to study. Qualitative research is best suited to the ability to study meaning and how “its proponents essentially claim that it is only through qualitative research that the world can be studied through the eyes of the people who are studied” (Bryman, 2004, p. 441). In Ireland, there is a broad range of services supporting adults with their career progression and decisions. Some professionals are more experienced and qualified than others. This can mean the difference in the quality of information and support received by the adult. The opportunity to develop a new, up-to-date, ICT quality career resource that could be used by many guidance providers in a helpful and meaningful way with their clients enthused me. I hoped that the coming together of different professionals through the advisory group who provide



career support to adults, might encourage greater consistency in service provision. Ritchie & Lewis (2003, p. 2) refers to the factors that can influence how the researcher undertakes their study:

It is important to recognise that there is no single, accepted way of doing qualitative research. Indeed, how researchers carry it out depends upon a range of factors including: their beliefs (ontology), the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired (epistemology), the purpose(s) and goals of the research, the characteristics of the research participants, the audience for the research, the funders of the research, and the position and environment of the researchers themselves.

## **2.2 A meaning-making, interpretive and constructivist approach**

My methodological approach sits comfortably with qualitative, post-positivist research methods. A constructivist approach brings with it the idea of the researcher being the interpreter of data in terms of making “meaning”. As a *researcher*, the influence of my values and perspectives are integrated into the study. There has been much written in terms of the “interpretivist” or meaning-making in qualitative research (Mason 1996, Snape and Spencer, Ritchie and Lewis 2003, Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2010 and McNiff, 2013). All discuss how research as a process is always interpreted by the researcher and is essentially a reconstruction of a social reality:

The research processes constitutes a (re) construction of a social reality in which the researchers both interact with the agents researched and, actively interpreting, continually create images for themselves and for others: images which selectively highlight certain claims as to how conditions and processes – experiences, situations, relations – can be understood, thus suppressing alternative interpretations. (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2010, p. 6)

As an advisory group we came together to create a meaningful resource for both service providers and adults. It was generally agreed that the development of a new ICT career resource had the potential to offer adults a suite of self-assessment tools that might facilitate an exploration of themselves as unique individuals. These included non-psychometric (aptitude) self-assessment tools on interests, skills, achievements and how these might translate in a meaningful way for clients in their career progression options. This adopts a strong grounding in the constructivist approach, recognising and valuing each individual as unique. As an adult guidance counsellor, I

regard the relationship with each client as central to the guidance process. Carl Rogers person-centred approach is what guides my practice. Rogers essentially believed that “the client knows best” and is the expert on him/herself, “so convinced of Rogers of this fundamental insight that he first called his way of working ‘non-directive’ counselling...thereby emphasising that the counsellor’s task is to enable the client make contact with his inner resources” (Mearns and Thorne, 1999, p. 1). The role of the counsellor is to encourage the process self-knowledge and authenticity. A quote by Kennedy and Charles (2001, p. 103) captures this philosophy “The key to any kind of success in counselling is our capacity to let people be exactly who and what they are in our presence”. As advisory group members we shared some commonalities in our work, but our roles and practices are also different. Therefore, considering my own assumptions when interpreting the research data is important. The process of *reflexivity* in my many roles in this study as a *group leader, participant, researcher, guidance counsellor* and *educator* will be openly examined in this study. McCormack & Ryan (2011, p. 7) explain reflexivity as “a disciplined commitment to regular and skilled scrutiny to one’s practice...to be able to discern what are feelings and experiences are telling is about ourselves, our clients, our world” (I include some of my reflections in blue font in this thesis).

McMahon & Patton (2002) describes the active role of the individual in the career counselling process as “constructivist” whereby the career counsellor works collaboratively with the individual in a holistic way. It helps them to look at their life and career and encourages the individual to actively reflect on, revise and reorient their life-career relationship. The constructivist view also “promotes the new perspective in counselling process that stresses on active agency, meaning-making, holism and collaborative relationships” (Abdillah, 2013, p. 95) In this study, I propose the concept of using ICT career self-assessment tools as effective, helpful and useful within adult education and guidance practice.

### 2.3 A methodological approach grounded in action research

The process of researching the advisory group work sits comfortably within the action research approach. Darbey (et al. 2013 p. 2) describes this:

Action research is the process of collaborative self-evaluation, whereby practitioners reflect on their work and identify areas that need reconsideration and possible improvement in dialogue with others. The process involves identification of an area for investigation; explanations for why this may be the case in terms of the desire to realise the practitioner's values in practice, while recognising that values need to be negotiated; monitoring practice and gathering data to show the social situation as it evolves; generating evidence in relation to values as they emerge in practice...and is especially useful for the guidance profession. It is a cyclical and developmental methodology, and is therefore appropriate for contexts of lifelong work-based learning.

O'Brien (1998) describes action research as a collaborative inquiry and put simply it is learning by doing where a group of people identify a problem and do something to resolve it and try again if needed. Elliott (2003) refers to the aim of action research to improve practice rather than produce knowledge. However, I propose that it is both a means of collaborative inquiry and an opportunity to theorise ones' practice. Merriman and Simpson (1995, p. 121) refer to how this type of research is useful in education "researchers in applied fields of study, such as those involved with the education and training of adults, are constantly searching for appropriate means to acquire knowledge". They explain three distinct characteristics that distinguish action research from other forms of social science research:

1. The researcher serves as a *facilitator* for problem solving and, in some cases, as a catalyst between the research findings and those individuals most likely to benefit or take action from the findings.
2. Results of research are intended for *immediate application* by those engaged in the research or by those for whom the research was initiated.
3. The design of action research is formulated *while the research is in progress*, rather than being totally predetermined at the onset of the study.

## 2.4 Action research typologies

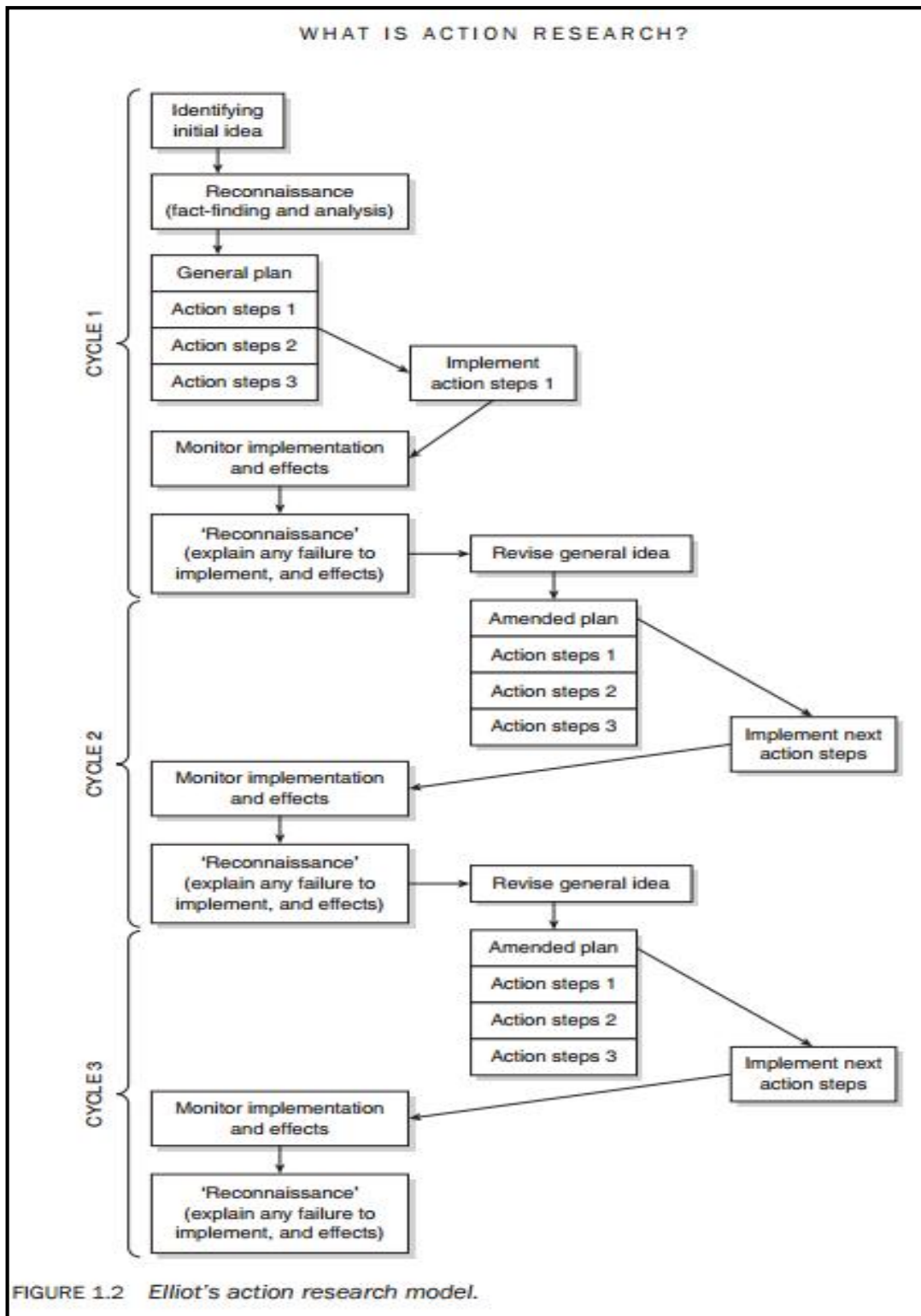
Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany first coined the term “action research” in 1946. He presented the idea of how participation in decision-making could lead to enhanced productivity. “Lewin was particularly interested in raising the self-esteem of minority groups....to help them gain independence, equality and co-operation through action research” (Adelman, 1993, p. 7). McNiff (2013, p. 56) states that:

Lewin developed a theory of action research as a spiral of steps involving planning, fact finding (or reconnaissance) execution which later became known as an action-reflection cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. This could in turn be extended into ongoing action-reflection cycles.

A revised version of Lewin’s action research model was devised by John Elliott who believed that the general idea should be allowed to shift, reconnaissance should happen throughout, and implementation of the action “is very often not straightforward and this should be examined before evaluating the effects of the action” (McNiff, 2013, p. 60). She offers context and history to the types of action research and outlines Reason and Bradbury (2008) first-person, second-person and third-person types:

- First-person action research occurs when an individual practitioner reflects on their personal practice and offers an account.
- Second-person action research is when people enquire with others about how they can address issues of mutual concern.
- Third-person action research aims to connect individual researchers with wider communities.

I can locate this study within first-person and second-person research. Although, clearly a collaborative process my reflexive learning is central to the research.



**Figure 2:** Elliot's action research model. Source: Elliot, J. Action Research for Educational Change, p.71 © 1991. A revised version of Lewin's model of Action research.

As action research evolved different models emerged. Its foundations are similar to Lewin's involving identifying a general idea, "reconnaissance" or finding out facts, planning, action, evaluation, amending the plan and taking a second action step and so on. Masters (1995) in keeping with Lewin's model identifies four basic themes of: empowerment of individuals, collaboration through participants, acquiring knowledge and social change. She presents the concept that it is *not* the methodologies by which these three modes differ. Rather, it is the differences in assumptions of those involved and can be traced to a question of *power*. This in turn then influences the *shift in typology*.

## 2.5 The shifting nature of action research

Hart & Bond (1996) present an original action research typology. They have developed orientations that differ in focus and knowledge base but argue that despite the differences there is underlying features consistent with all types of action research approaches. "These are collaboration between researcher and practitioner, solution of practical problems, change in practice, and development of theory" (p. 152). They discuss three *key criteria* of action research:

- Re-Education
- Problem Focus
- Improvement and Involvement

They then relate these to *four broad types* of action research:

- Experimental
- Organisational
- Professionalizing
- Empowering

They point out that action research is difficult to define but the typology makes it possible to identify particular characteristics. This should help gain insight into whether the research leans more towards the *experimental* or *empowering* side. They point out the value of the researcher being able to locate themselves in terms of their selection of an appropriate type in anticipating problems (1996, p. 153).

## 2.6 Locating my study within action research typologies

I have previously mentioned that my methodology is strongly influenced by my values, beliefs and experiences. Reflecting on my learning in relation to my role as *insider-researcher*; both as a researcher observer and a participant within the advisory group, encouraged a method of reflexivity. Reflexivity within the research process is described by Lincoln and Guba (2000, p. 183) as a “conscious experiencing of the self within the process of researching it-self”. Learning and reflecting on the different types of action research, I can position myself within a combination of the three Hart and Bond (1996), O’Leary (2004) and McNiff (2002, 2013) models. Locating myself in the above Hart and Bond typology I quote a piece from my reflective journal:

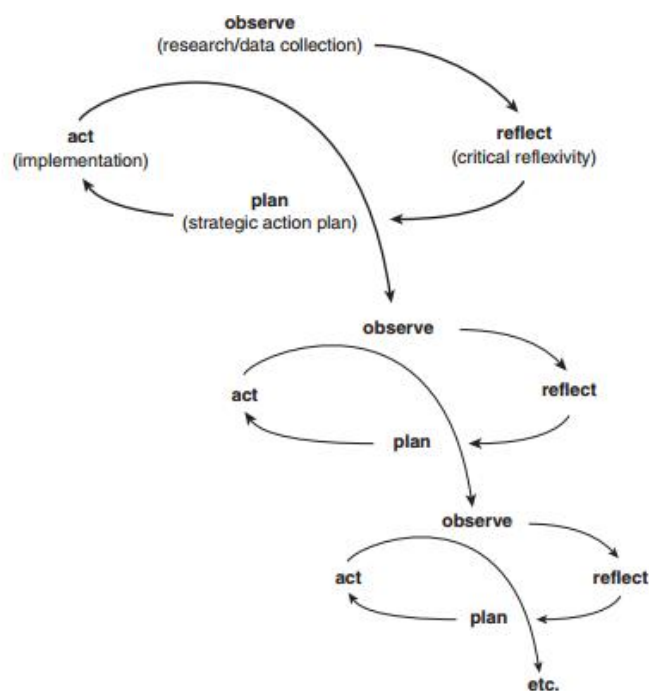
When I set out on this research journey with the advisory group it was clear that we had a common aim – to work as a team to develop something new, innovative in response to the challenges faced by each service in their daily work to support adults in their career development. Clearly, this had a strong focus on a problem or gap to improve our practice and in turn hopefully improving the experience of the adults we support.

However, my interest in the client’s experience is hugely important to me. As a guidance counsellor, I put immense value on creating a supportive client-helper relationship, one that is underpinned by a person-centred individualised approach. I realise now that the advisory group as “professionals” are driving this new development and not the adults that will become the end user. Therefore, it emerged to me my value on the importance of a new tool enhancing the guidance process. My interest and hope to consider how this new tool can be integrated into a holistic way in the guidance process has clearly shifted the typology to include a much more empowering focus and one that values and considers these adults, their experience and input as equally important into the research.

I feel the study incomplete if I do not get an opportunity to gather even some initial feedback from the adult client’s experiences. However, I am against time in that *MyFuture+* was only launched this month and my research is at this point now in its final trimester. (Journal Notes, 11<sup>th</sup> March 2016)

Initially, the focus of this research was “problem-focused and professionalizing” (Hart and Bond, 1996, p. 154). The main aim of the advisory group was to inform the development of a new ICT tool for “improvement in practice defined by professionals on behalf of users” (ibid.). This later shifted because of my values and hope that the new ICT tool would be useful for the client within the guidance relationship. I wanted a

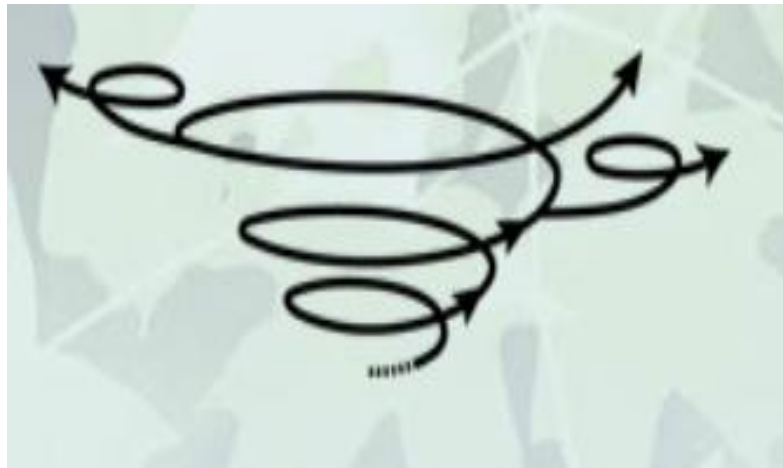
more empowering type of action research; where the problem is located in the experience and negotiated by less powerful individuals (ibid.) I identify with is *O’Leary’s model* (2004) which describes the action research process as “cyclical” and one that takes shape as new knowledge emerges. Each cycle is refined in light of understanding developed in previous cycles (Koshy, 2010, p. 8). I will later discuss how the process of action and reflection through action research is not necessarily a linear one. The procedure of planning, action, reflection and observing can all in fact be occurring at the same time.



**Figure 3:** Source: Koshy, 2010, p. 8 Adapted and cited from O’Leary’s cycles of Action Research (2004).

McNiff (2013, p. 67) refers to these emerging shifts and the complexities in the process of action research. She demonstrates the following diagram that I identify with to show how action research can change over time as a *spontaneous, self-recreating system of enquiry* and that she likes “the notion of a systematic process of observe, describe, plan, act, reflect, evaluate, modify, but I do not see the process as sequential or necessarily rational. It is possible to begin at one place and end up somewhere unexpected.”





**Figure 4:** “A generative transformational evolutionary process”  
Adapted from: [www.mcniff.com](http://www.mcniff.com).

She discusses the importance of reflexivity as transformational throughout the action research process by saying that “two processes are at work: your systematic actions as you work your way through these steps, and your learning. Your actions embody your learning, and your learning is informed by your reflections on your actions”.

This diagram has been helpful to me in understanding what has very often felt like *messy* and unpredictable research. Schön (1983, p. 54) refers to the confusing nature of research in relation to theory and practice. Theory or research is described as the “high, hard ground” and practice lives in the “swampy lowlands”. As an action researcher, I was both inside and outside the process. I was impacting on the research and this influenced my chosen action and methods used. I often felt it difficult to theoretically explain my research because of the practical hands on nature of it. My professional reflexivity is at the heart of this study. Discussing the nature of reflexive practice Moon (2004, p. 82) describes this as:

A process of re-organising knowledge and emotional orientations in order to achieve further insights....reflexive practice emphasises the use of reflection in professional or other complex activities as a means of coping with situations that are ill-structured and/or unpredictable.

I will illustrate the complexities and difficulties in the phases of the research process in Chapter 4.

## 2.7 The methods adopted

The phases or cycles of this research and my reflexive process shaped the methods used. Central to the post-positivist qualitative methods employed are my reflective journal notes throughout the MEd learning process (some extracts in blue font). This included the tracking of my group supervision learning and conversations with my supervisor. Field observations in my work with the advisory group were noted and later on in the process with the two groups of young adult learners. Maxwell (2005, p. 94)) describes qualitative observation:

Observation often provides a direct and powerful way of learning about people's behaviour and the context in which this occurs...this is particularly important for getting at tacit understandings and 'theory in use', as well as aspects of the participant's perspective that they are reluctant to directly state an interview.

I kept a detailed record of minutes of meetings, e-mails and phone conversations with advisory group members. Short feedback questionnaires were circulated to the 12 members in the beginning and followed up with opportunities for additional information via e-mails. (Appendix 4). An extensive review of research and literature of ICT in the context adult guidance practice was undertaken. Despite the fact that there has been much written about the value of ICT in educational contexts, it transpired that within Ireland there is currently a clear gap in the research into the integration of ICT into holistic adult guidance practice. I located one study being undertaken by a Masters student in the University of Limerick on the integration of ICT in second-level school guidance counselling in Ireland. However, at the time of writing this thesis this is in the process of undergoing its own submission. In the final phase of this research, I was given the opportunity to present to my peers at the "Beyond Activation" Adult Guidance Conference in Maynooth University in April 2016. It emerged to me as a researcher that it would be a useful platform to briefly reflect with fellow adult guidance counsellors. I posed the question to them on their views of the importance of ICT within the adult guidance relationship. A total of 11 delegates provided me with informed consent to use their feedback in the form of a short questionnaire (Appendix 11).

The pilot *MyFuture+* was not launched until 1<sup>st</sup> March 2016 which meant that in terms of my research, I had limited time capture some feedback from adults using the new ICT tool. However, data was gathered for analysis from 4 advisory group members through written questionnaires (Appendix 9 and 10). Three were interviewed for twenty minutes in which two were audio recorded and later transcribed. Maxell (2005, p. 84) referring to interviews:

Although observation often provides a direct and powerful way of learning about people's behaviour and the context in which this occurs, interviewing can also be a valuable way of gaining a description of actions and events – often *the only way*, for events that took place in the past or ones to which you cannot gain observational access.

Members of the advisory group were in fact piloting *MyFuture+* both in educational groups with their learners and on a one-to-one basis with clients. I could not possibly access or observe this process. Gathering data in relation to their insights was important to me. Feedback from learners or clients using the new career tool was gathered in the form of two focus groups (Appendix 8) this involved group discussions with a total 18 young adults using *MyFuture+* (for a period of 5 weeks) and they each completed a short questionnaire (Appendix 7).

## **2.8 Ethical considerations**

Punch (1998, p. 171) discusses the challenge of having to obtain informed consent prior to the research and states that the “predicament that informed consent – divulging one's identity and research purpose to all and sundry – will kill many a project stone dead”. I did not seek the consent of the advisory group to research our work until our second meeting in November 2015. This was due to a number of reasons:

1. I was still unsure of my choice of research topic.
2. We had just formed as a group, and only beginning to get to know each other. I felt it was too early at our first meeting in October 2015 to seek their consent.
3. I was unsure of what exactly I was seeking their consent to do. The forming of the group was something I had to do for my work, but I was not yet clear of how it would work from a research perspective. I felt I needed to learn more about

methodologies and the different research types before deciding on a clear research topic and the methods I would use.

I was granted consent from my employers to undertake the research as part of my work. At our second advisory group meeting I explained my research, provided members with a written description of its aims, and stressed that there was no expectation or obligation to participate (Appendix 2). I reassured them that consented data gathered would be anonymous so that as research participants they would not be identifiable (Appendix 3). For the purpose of the pilot, the advisory group was later expanded to include adult educators who began trialling *MyFuture+* with their groups of learners. Informed consent was also sought and granted from these educators to use data gathered in the feedback forms and interviews for the purpose of my study (Appendix 10).

A key ethical consideration that was agreed in the advisory group was that individuals participating in the pilot would need to provide their consent to allow access their information. In terms of the legal requirements of protecting the information of individuals the *Data Protection Act (1988, 2003)* established that information about individuals must be accurate, only made available to those that should have it and only used for specified purposes. It also notes that individuals have the right to access personal information relating to them and have any errors corrected or, in some cases, have the information erased. The two focus groups with 18 young adult learners also had to be considered from an ethical perspective. Firstly, I felt it inappropriate to gather feedback in a one-to-one setting and felt a focus group with staff present was a more ethical and safe way of collecting data. An issue that informed this choice of method was the fact that many of these participants were not yet aged 18. Although young adults outside of mainstream school some were still minors. It was necessary if the young person involved was underage to gain written consent from their Parents/Guardians (Appendix 6). Those aged 18 and over also provided consent to allow their written feedback be included (Appendix 7). Data or quotes from the transcribed interviews were sent to the advisory group members to ensure they were comfortable with the possibility of me using any of them. I was granted their

permission to use these as they were. Josselson (2007, p. 537) “In essence, ethical practice and ethical codes rest on the principle of assuring the free consent of participants to participate, guarding the confidentiality of the material, and protecting participants from any harm that may ensue from their participation”. Ensuring that participants felt comfortable throughout the research process was important to me.

## **2.9 Challenges and limitations of the research**

My aim to critically collaborate with other practitioners to develop a new ICT career tool, to be then piloted with adults to gather their feedback for analysis in a short MEd timeframe of nine months was very ambitious. I discovered through the phases of action and reflection that I needed to become more realistic and consider what was actually feasible. What is clear about this methodological approach is that evaluating one’s practice is the hope that new emerging and reflexive learning will influence an improvement both personally and professionally. The nature of this type of research is that you have to evaluate what you are doing (McNiff, 2010). As action research is ever emerging, I found it challenging to know when to draw a line under collecting data and be satisfied with what had been achieved in the timeframe of this study. Hatch (2002, p. 150) talks about the unfinished nature of qualitative research by stating that:

No qualitative analysis is ever complete. There are always more data than can be adequately processed, more levels of understanding than can be explored, and more stories that can be told. Data analysis is like teaching – there is always more you could do.

The pilot process of *MyFuture+* will continue until the end of June 2016 when the advisory group will come together to evaluate the pilot. This research was concerned with my *real* practice, and so, I am heartened that my learning will continue beyond this thesis.

## **CHAPTER 3: “ICT AND ADULT GUIDANCE POLICY AND PRACTICE”**

*“The use of interactive e-learning technologies by careers workers has so far been limited and has not been effectively evaluated. However, it is possible to make a strong argument that the way in which interactive e-learning encourages discussion, reflection, engagement with learning materials and integration of learning into learners’ current situation would lend itself well to career development”*

(Hooley, 2012, p. 9)

### **3.0 Introduction**

In this chapter, I will examine relevant literature and theoretical models pertaining to my research topic. What emerged from studying the relevant literature is the current gap in research that exists in relation to ICT and its integration within holistic adult guidance practice, particularly from an Irish perspective. Within the limitations of this study it is not possible for me to explore this. However, through gathering data for analysis on *MyFuture+* from an adult guidance counsellor, educator and young adult perspective, I hope to offer some insights from my learning later on. In doing so, this may inform future research in this area.

### **3.1 The relationship between career development and ICT**

Fundamental to my role as a guidance counsellor is to try and create helpful and supportive relationships so as to encourage a process of positive change in my client’s lives. This is core of what I understand guidance is. At the heart of this study is my growing interest in investigating the role of ICT in the context of adult guidance counselling and how the guidance relationship is informed and shaped by its presence. Since the mid to late 1990s the use of digital technologies and the use of the internet has flourished. For most, the internet has become an integral part of everyday life and now pervades our professional, personal and social lives.

The internet is a highly complex social, as well as technological, phenomenon which is increasingly interwoven into every aspect of life, learning and work...there is a need to see the internet as an integral part of the social fabric and to recognise that it provides a major context in which career development is enacted.

(Hooley, 2012, p. 3)

Watts (2002, p. 3-4) analyses the evolution of ICT in the field of career information and guidance and presents it in the four phases of *The Mainframe Phase* (mid-1960s to the late 1970s) when a number of computer-assisted guidance systems were developed and demonstrated the potential of ICT. *The Micro Computer Phase* (early 1980s to mid-1990s) when the more powerful version of the personal computer was developed. *The Web Phase* (late 1990s) when websites could be developed and guidance services began building their own. *The Digital Phase* (the current phase) individuals are now able to access the internet not only through their personal computers but also through their televisions and mobile phones. He notes the role of ICT in guidance can be seen as “a tool, as an alternative and now it’s potential as an agent of change”.

Bolles (2016) talks about how job-hunting has moved more online since 2008 and that nowadays people go to the internet. He mentions the importance of having the skills and knowledge to use a computer or how to access the internet. Jobsites are not the only online sites frequented by job seekers:

Social media and other sites have become more and more popular - LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, WhatsApp, e-mail, Skype, YouTube, etc. – job-hunters and employers alike have figured out how to use them in the job-hunt (p. 9).

He points out that individuals now seek support and careers information through technology “the first idea that occurs to people seeking guidance on how to choose or change careers, these days, is the internet.” (p. 233) and refers to how the “Google” search engine is the new “resume” and very often the first point of contact for employers. The use of the internet or being on-line “is a place where many go to explore and develop their career thinking and development, and career practitioners will want to know enough about what is available, even if it’s not central to their particular working context” (Reid, 2016, p. 223).

According to Hooley (et al., 2010) there are three ways in which career guidance practitioners use ICT; to deliver information, to provide an automated interaction and as a channel for communication. “The use of technology can automate the initial exploration and diagnostic elements of usual advice and guidance service” (p. 3). The provision of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) in careers guidance with adults is

used to describe a range of activities can be viewed as distinct (Department of Education and Skills, 2003, pp. 14-15).

- *Information*: this relates to the process of informing clients about issues relevant to their development and usually needs only some interpretation.
- *Advice*: is about helping clients to undertake that interpretation of information and select the most appropriate option.
- *Guidance*: is helping clients to understand their own needs relating to learning and work, set goals/objectives for learning and work, understand their barriers to learning and work and overcome barriers to learning and work; and to produce learning and action plans.

It is evident that providing career guidance to adults is not just about the provision of relevant and quality information. It is necessary to support a process of making the information meaningful in their lives. Clearly, to provide this help effectively, face-to-face dialogue is fundamental to a holistic guidance relationship.

### **3.2 Integrating ICT tools into holistic adult guidance counselling: a policy perspective**

Apart from the importance of career guidance practitioners having an understanding of how to use the internet in their careers work, there is also a growing expectation at policy level, that careers services increase their productivity and reduce their costs. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) argued “for the need to harness ICT to increase and improve efficiency of career guidance services at the international level” (Bimrose, Kettunen and Goddard 2015, p. 9). In a recent report, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (2015, p. 5) outlines the core competencies and professional practice framework in Ireland for guidance counsellors:

The IGC competency framework describes a dynamic model which sees the self of the guidance counsellor as the central component to the practice of the core professional competencies of guidance counselling. While an essential element is the underpinning theoretical knowledge and the acquisition of the necessary skill base for the development of the core professional and practice competencies, the client-counsellor relationship is central to the work of the guidance professional.



This report focuses on the more contemporary delivery and practice of a “holistic model” of guidance counselling that integrates *counselling and assessment* of the whole person and makes reference to the importance of information technology to support practice. The holistic guidance counsellor’s role is to facilitate the client through three interconnected areas of their life i.e. *personal/social, educational and vocational guidance counselling* and mentions these in relation to ICT in practice:

It is important that the guidance practitioner uses information technology to support practice and that information management strategies are developed, maintained and reviewed to provide up-to-date vocational, personal/social and educational information (p. 31-32)

The Department of Education and Skills in Ireland (2016) launched a consultation document that addresses proposed criteria and guidelines for programme providers of guidance counselling. It refers to post-qualification professional development. It mentions the activities relating to the work of a guidance counsellor in *all* service settings to include the provision of “labour market, learning and career-related information through Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and blended learning approaches” (p. 8). It mentions the holistic or whole person nature of adult guidance and counselling in relation to the personal and social, education and career development and highlights the role of guidance in facilitating decision-making and life choices. Key competencies or skills expected from practising guidance counsellors are highlighted, including; the ability to employ ICT tools and online resources to enhance service delivery (p. 13) and the ability to develop guidance counselling related information resources and services using a range of media including ICT (p. 14). Furthermore, the OECD report (2004. p. 10) includes ICT in careers guidance practice and adopts the definition of careers guidance as the:

Services and activities intended to assist individuals of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers. The activities may take place on an individual or group basis, and may be face to face or at a distance (including help lines and web-based services). They include career information provision (in print, ICT-based and other forms), assessment and self-assessment tools, counselling interviews, career education programmes (to help individuals develop their self- awareness, opportunity awareness, and career management skills), taster programmes...work search programmes, and transition services.

It is recognised here that the use of ICT in career guidance counselling has the potential to span all three interconnected areas of the individual's personal/social, educational and vocational life. In particular, within the area of educational and vocational guidance it has the most potential. In vocational guidance, guidance counsellors employ the core competencies of *counselling and assessment* to assist clients identify strengths, interests, aptitudes, values, abilities, skills and personality factors which influence career decision-making; to recognise their transferable skills; to source and use occupational information, to develop career decision-making techniques (NICE, 2012, p. 66). *MyFuture+* offers centralised informal qualitative ICT career assessment tools. Bimrose (et. al, 2015 p. 13) argue that "developing customised materials, is probably the most underdeveloped currently, with considerable untapped potential for the enhancement of materials". She stresses the need for "the design of ICT systems to be fit for purpose" but for more research around models that allow professionals to "combine guidance practices with new technologies".

Combining both client ICT or on-line activity and guidance practice offers synergy. Reid (2016, p. 223) states "I do not view the internet or digital technologies within careers work as offering a complete service, nor, of course, do face-to-face services." Niles, Harris & Bowsbey (2009, p.229) cite the work of Taber & Luzzo, 1999 & Whitson, 2003 whose studies "provides data indicating that the most effective means of providing career planning assistance to students or clients is by a combination of computer and counselor". Therefore, a blended approach of the use of technologies with traditional face-to-face careers work can provide a more holistic approach that is recognised at policy level. In reality, not all guidance counsellors and indeed individuals/clients are comfortable with or have developed competency with the use of technology. The development of new ICT tools/adult career file, will not be appropriate for and suit all clients in terms of their digital literacy needs, access to and interest in using them.

### **3.3 Lifelong guidance, building career management skills: a European perspective**

Adult guidance can be defined as:

Facilitating people to manage their own educational, training, occupational, personal, social, and life choices so that they reach their full potential and contribute to the development of a better society (National Guidance Forum, 2007, p.6).

Based on the European definition, lifelong guidance refers to a range of activities that enables individuals of any age and at any point in their lives, to identify their competences and interests. This includes making educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which these capacities and competences are learned and/or used. The major goal of guidance is to build *career management skills*. These are defined as “a range of competences which provide structured ways for individuals (and groups) to gather, analyse, synthesise and organise self, educational and occupational information, as well as the skills to make and implement decisions and transitions” (p. 24). Consequently, significant to the role of the adult guidance practitioner is to encourage and equip individuals to develop capacity to learn about their strengths, interests and manage their own careers throughout their lives.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in lifelong guidance refers to:

The products, infrastructure, and electronic content that enhance policy and systems development for lifelong guidance and the delivery of lifelong guidance services, resources, and tools. It refers to how interactive services, resources and tools are designed and developed for citizens, how citizens use these, and how such uses in turn reshape that design. It also refers to the digital competency required to use ICT in a lifelong guidance context. (ELGPN, 2015, p. 26)

Noted here is the digital competency that is needed to access ICT career information and tools throughout the lifespan. The report highlights the need for digital inclusion that ensures that socio-economic disadvantaged groups have access to and the skills to use ICT in lifelong guidance (pp. 26-28).

### **3.4 Combining holistic guidance counselling models with ICT qualitative assessment**

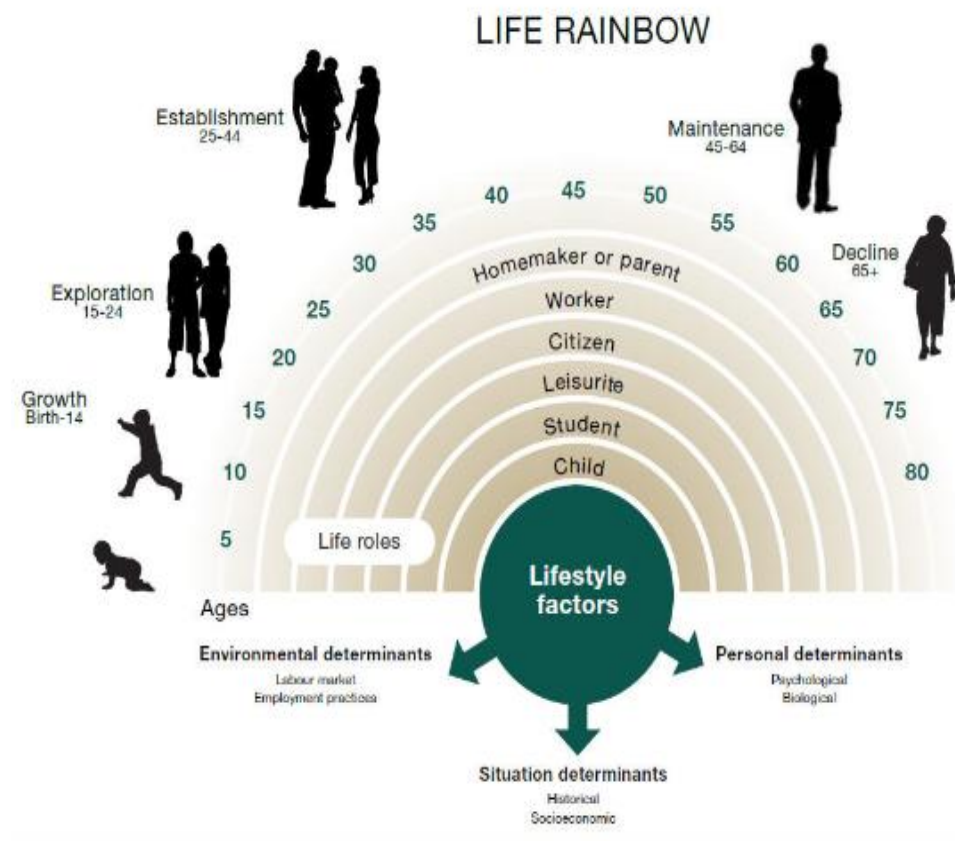
The importance of guidance counselling being holistic and addressing the needs of the whole person is a key concept. Zunker (2011, p.2) states:

The career counselling process does not separate career and personal concerns but integrates them to better evaluate how all life roles are interrelated. Understanding the whole person as a member of complex social systems is the cornerstone of effective career counselling. Counsellors are to recognise the relationship between career issues and all other life roles and assist people and systems to discover healthier ways of living.

The internet as a phenomenon is increasingly being interwoven into every aspect of everyday life. In terms of understanding the whole person as a member of complex social systems and recognising career in relation to other life roles, much has been written about life-span or career development theory. In particular, the work of Donald Super has received ongoing attention in terms of his “explicit notion that career development is interwoven with personal development” (O’Rourke, 2015, p. 26). He adds that Super’s concept of vocational choice indicates that “self-knowledge plays a major role in career choices and decisions...and that we act purposefully and we seek integration of our values, interests, abilities and self-concepts.” Super viewed career development as a life-long process with multiple decision points along the way. The concept of career as a process as a life-long archway or rainbow is key to Super’s description of career development. The complex nature of this is immersed in life roles and their issues. He viewed the five life stages and roles of *growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and decline* in relation to life roles such as homemaker, citizen, leisurite, student and child, but that a person may be at any stage. Later on in his career he re visited his use of the term “self-concept” for “personal construct”.

Arnold (1997, p. 130) referring to Super use of constructing meaning with clients states:

He stressed that he did take into account how people’s opportunities in life are influenced by factors such as their gender and socioeconomic status. But he emphasised that such factors affect a person’s self-concept, and that the careers people experience are heavily influenced by features of their self-concept as well as societal structures.



**Figure 5:** Donald Super’s Life Rainbow: Sourced from: Staunton (2012, p.6)

The guidance relationship encourages a re-framing of the person’s self-concept and this is central to supporting clients’ career development. This requires attention to the limitations of ICT career resources without adult guidance support.

### **3.5 Limitations and challenges of integrating ICT career tools in adult guidance practice**

#### **Complexities of client's issues in relation to their environment**

Super influenced the idea that as individuals, having a sense of oneself is important with career choice because we change over time. His life-rainbow theory emphasising the different stages a person goes through is influenced by three life-style determinants. These include *environmental* (such as labour market and employment practices), *situational* (such as historical, socio-economic) and *personal* (such as psychological, biological). Evident here is a clear issue in relation to how ICT career tools address and consider the person within the context of their environment. This is where face-to-face guidance is fundamental and cannot be replaced or substituted. Exploring and teasing out issues is part of the client-counsellor dialogue within the guidance relationship.

Hansen (1997) builds on the work of the late Donald Super with her "integrative life planning framework". This is a way of seeing oneself in terms of personal development and the context we live in. It considers gender, multi-culturalism and diversity and social and personal aspects of the individual. In this context, the use of the ICT tools is limited and struggles to address the more complex dimensions of individuals explored within the context of the face-to-face guidance relationship process.

#### **ICT viewed as a replacement or substitute to face-to-face support**

There is a danger at policy level that because ICT career tools may initially reduce the contact time needed early in the guidance process that it may be viewed as a substitute for support, with more of an emphasis on improving efficiency at policy level. Watts refers to how ICT can often be viewed as a replacement for guidance:

Constantly lurking beneath professional anxieties about the use of ICT in guidance has been the fear of *reductionism*: that the use of technology will lead to simplistic, "quick fix", information-based approaches, in which the human element is marginalised or eliminated. Increasingly, however, it can be used within an *integrated approach* not only to supplement but also extend the range of this human element. (Watts, 2001, p. 9)

### **Limited knowledge of ICT qualitative assessment in adult guidance practice**

In relation to personal guidance practice, there appears to be a definitive lack of knowledge around developing qualitative assessment tools in guidance and counselling. Bimrose, Kettunen, Goddard (2015, p. 9) refer to the issue of the lack of knowledge in relation to the development of new customised materials. They state “despite a degree of consensus regarding its importance, there is little agreement on what the integration of ICT in careers practice actually comprises” (p. 9). McMahon, Patton and Watson (2003, p. 1) state that “there is very little to guide the development and conduct of qualitative assessment in career counselling”. More research is needed in this area in terms of combining face-to-face guidance practice with new technologies.

### **Digital exclusion**

Hooley (et. al, 2010, p. 8) refers to the issue of digital literacy and the fact that many individuals are not connected or engaged resulting in “digital exclusion”. He states that being digitally literate can result in individuals increasing their “social capital and social inclusion”. According to Reid (2016, p. 28) citing Hooley (2012) there are many individuals in the United Kingdom who are already disadvantaged by economic and social factors which increase their disadvantage by lack of access to careers information and job opportunities.

## **3.6 Potential of ICT career tools in the adult guidance meaning-making relationship**

### **Potential of ICT career tools in encouraging a process of self-exploration**

What is clear in the literature is the potential of ICT career information and self-assessment in encouraging and helping clients to learn more about themselves in relation to career. This new learning can inform the guidance relationship in a positive way by encouraging a dialogue and support the client to construct new career meaning in their career development decisions. Personal constructs evolve over time which echo Super’s life-stage theory. Niles, Harris-Bowlsbey (2009, p. 114) explore this idea in relation to the development of “several career counselling interventions aimed at exploring and reconstructing the clients unique matrix of meaning.” Niles (2011)

reflects on current career contexts which require high levels of self-awareness, creative visioning and adaptability. This adaptability requires self-knowledge and attitudes and behaviours needed for effective career self-management including hope, self-reflection, self-clarity, visioning, goal setting and planning and implementation. Through the process of guidance counselling, clients can become empowered as the relationship aims to instil a sense of hope, change and new beginnings.

### **ICT career tools supporting a collaborative meaning-making guidance relationship**

McMahon, Patton and Watson (2003, p. 5) stress that the constructivist philosophy:

Emphasise the personal and contextual nature of careers. Further, constructivism encourages narrative and storied approaches to career development that value individuals and the contextual location of their careers. In this regard, qualitative career assessments processes that foster the narration of the individual's stories are highly relevant.

Savickas (2011, p. 38) describes constructivist counselling a "relationship constructed through narration. Stories serve as the construction tools for building narrative identity and highlighting career themes in complex social interactions". Egan (1998, p. 41) states that "in the working alliance, helpers and clients are collaborators". Referring to the work of Carl Rogers and his "client-centered" relationship he claimed such counsellors' help clients to understand themselves, tap into their resources and manage their lives more effectively.

### **ICT informing new adult guidance narrative models**

Millward (2010, p. 316) describes this as "the role of counsellor as a "co-author", helping clients to construct and enact more meaningful career narratives through a process of active engagement and dialogue". Yates (2014) talks about the importance of career as a story. A suite of ICT career tools that promote personal learning and actively engage the client in relation to their story; their career interests, skills, values, personality, work experience, curriculum vitae, can integrate and support this type of blended learning and collaborative approach.



Reid and West (2011, pp. 175-176) talk about the need to:

Not create one new model but rather a range of new and old to be used in accordance with the person's (young) perspective in relation to the meanings they construct about themselves, their place in the world of education and work is key to effective career and life planning in which narrative approaches can provide fuller access.

### **3.7 Computer-assisted guidance systems in Europe**

Offer (1997, p. 4) describes how making sense of future developments in ICT could "enable careers and guidance professionals to integrate what they do using the computer with what they do as counsellors in the face-to-face situation" but that his experience has been that the use of information technology by "career advisers" has been persistently slowed down because of their inability to integrate it with more "human ways of helping others". He discussed a *typology of computer software* (pp. 8-9) which is relevant to careers guidance as the following:

**(1) Self-Assessment:** programmes that help you to assess yourself and provide a profile in terms that also describe the world of work. Many are simple self-assessment questionnaires: interests, skills or work values may be assessed. Example: "Careerbuilder".

**(2) Matching Systems:** programmes that match you to occupations or (more rarely) courses. Examples include: "Adult Directions".

**(3) Information Retrieval:** These are often allied with those in category 2 and include databases of occupations and courses with simple mechanisms for retrieving data relevant to certain criteria from a menu of search factors. Examples like "Course Discover".

**(4) Games and Simulations:** range from programmes designed to be used as business games to others with a "playful" approach to advice and guidance and simulations of "real situations". Example: "Swiss JobCity."

**(5) Decision-Aids:** usually content free and help you analyse the factors you use in decision-making and apply these to a typical decision. Examples: "You decide" and "Personal View of Jobs."

**(6) Dedicated Word Processors:** writing a good CV, letter of application, computers support this. Example UK "CV Processor".

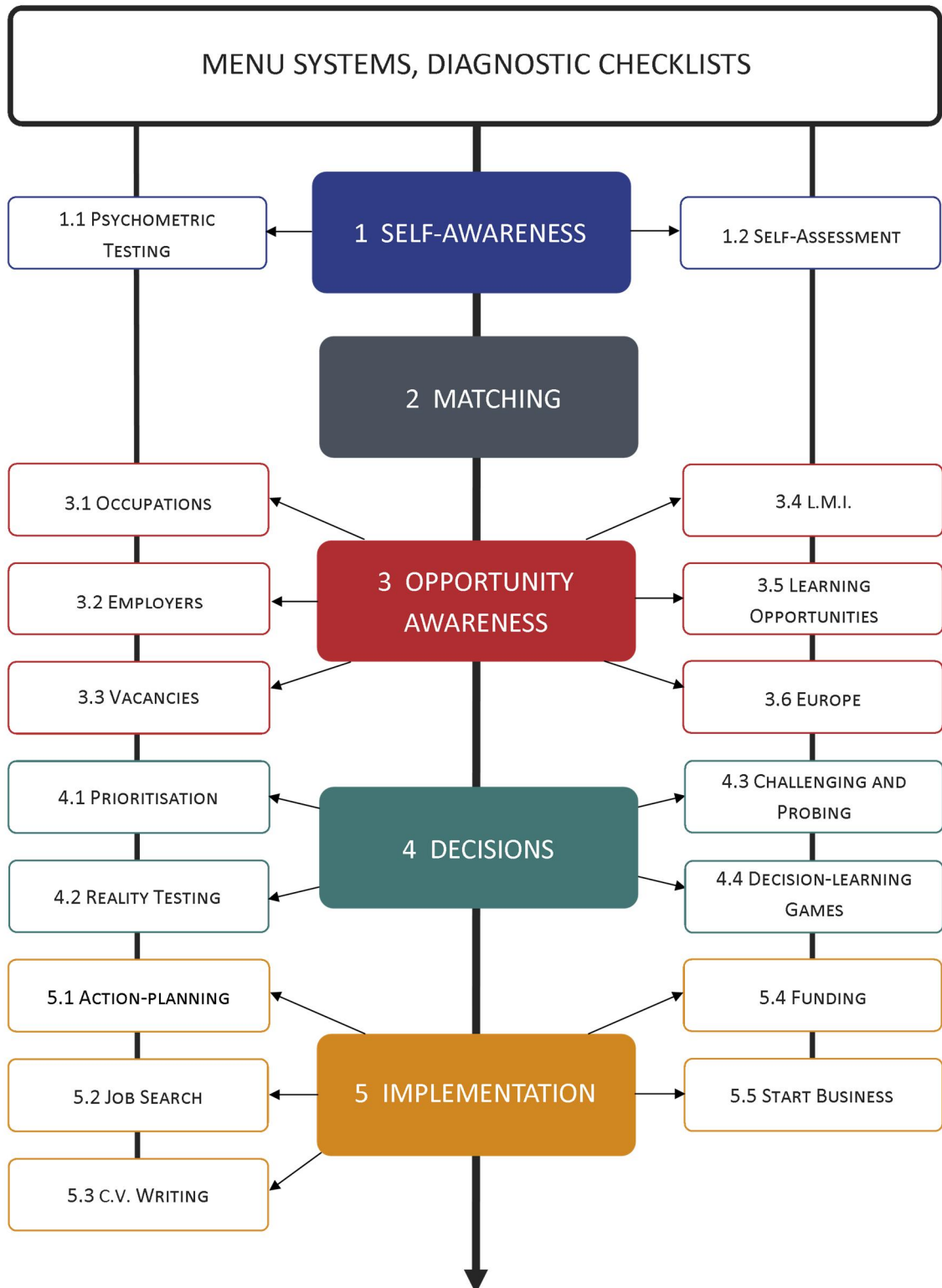
**(7) Computer Based Training:** programmes that teach job seeking skills for example handling interviews and frequently involves multi-media. Examples: “Swiss JobCity”.

**(8) Psychometric Testing:** claim to measure with some objectivity the individual’s personality, ability, aptitude and accompanying statistical data about reliability and validity with norm groups for comparison. Example: “German DELTA System”.

When reviewing more up to date CAGS for adults, I located two available ICT career tools for adults in Ireland: *Icares Professional* (2002), a web based career tool “that facilitates guidance professionals to help their students or clients make adequate career decisions” and *Career Decision Maker* (2004), a psychometric based tool “provides a personal profile to help open up new possibilities and shape career choices.” Neither integrate with up-to-date career sector, occupational or labour market information from in an Irish context.

### **3.8 Developing a conceptual framework underpinned by career learning theory**

Maxwell (2015, p. 41) describes the conceptual framework for research as “something that is constructed, not found. It incorporates pieces that are borrowed from elsewhere, but the structure, the overall coherence, is something that you build, not something that exists ready-made.” Offer (1997, pp. 12-16) uses the following model to demonstrate how ICT computer-assisted guidance systems can be used within careers work. I have not located a more up-to-date version of this and so this concept has been re-illustrated by Burrows (2016) for me. This more visually attractive model explains the principles of how ICT guidance-assisted systems integrate with a career learning model of career guidance.



**Figure 6:** Computer-Assisted Guidance & DOTS – A Model, Offer, M., 1997, p. 12. Adapted and re-illustrated by Burrows, A. (June 2016).

Offer (1997) states that the *needs of the user* and *a model of the career choice* should be considered. The above diagram can help us to understand what we are doing with ICT in relation to the *DOTS model*, first developed by Bill Law and Tony Watts in the 1970s. They describe guidance as delivering four general learning outcomes and aims; *self-awareness, opportunity awareness, decision learning and transition learning*. Building on the DOTS model, Law draws on the work of other theorists and expands his community interaction theory developed in 1981. In his up-dated model he argues for the need to support people through a lifelong process of career-related thinking and rethinking:

The requirement is that people need repeatedly to review career choices and transitions, with thought and care. All this argues for supporting people through a lifelong process of career-related thinking and rethinking, action and new action. (Law, 1996, p. 1)

Later in this study, I will examine the existence of opportunities for career learning and the development of career management skills in an analysis of the interviews, questionnaires and focus group findings.

## CHAPTER 4: “CYCLES OF ACTION AND REFLECTION: A REFLEXIVE PROCESS”

***“One of the challenges about carrying out investigations in the ‘real world’ is to seek to say something sensible about a complex, relatively poorly controlled and generally messy situation”***

(Robson, 1993, p.3)

### **4.0 My research journey**

In Chapter 2, I discussed how as a participant-observer researcher, I began to understand how I was shaping and influencing the research and methods adopted. I will now provide a descriptive account of this action research process as a journey. I have divided this journey into three distinctive yet interlinked *cycles* or phases. These have helped me to make sense of what often felt like an untidy and complex research experience. They include: *collaboration, innovation and integration* to explain what actually happened; the *“action”* and my reflexive process; the *“reflection”*.

As previously discussed *O’Leary’s model* demonstrates how action research is a process of planning, observing, action and reflection. However, that is not to suggest that this happens in linear way. In fact, what I experienced was a lot of these processes were actually happening at once. Atkinson (1994, p. 399) alludes to this “the models of the spirals of action research look neat and orderly but the actual experience in the field is often messy and fraught.” In each of the cycles, I have weaved in extracts from a poem called “For the Interim Time” by John O’Donohue (2007, p. 134) as I often felt in betwixt and between time; waiting for things to emerge.

### **4.1 “Collaboration”– coming together: cycle 1**

***“No place looks like itself, loss of outline***

***Makes everything look strangely in-between***

***Unsure of what has been, or what might come.”***

### **Action: Cycle 1: October-December 2015**

In September 2015, representatives from key public organisations were invited to join the CareersPortal advisory group. The aim was to discuss current gaps in the provision of effective ICT careers resources and work collaboratively to develop a new ICT tool. Initially, members were from the same geographical location, but later this expanded to include representative staff from other locations. In early October 2015, a group of ten members formed the group (including two of us from CareersPortal). Some knew each other and seemed to have a good referral and working relationship in their area. Representatives included: AEGI, DSP, Youthreach, LES and CareersPortal consisting of some qualified guidance counsellors and others with their own experience and expertise of supporting adults with career and educational decisions (Appendix 1).

The first group meeting took place in October 2015. In summary, I facilitated a discussion in relation to current “systems” being used to track client information. Whilst, there are systems in place they were identified as being used to collect “data” but there is no system that staff can access that profiles client’s unique career information such as CVs, skills, interests and so on. A written quote by one member highlights this gap:

Currently we work on several separate systems which is time consuming and can be confusing for clients. With a limited IT capability clients are not generally comfortable with accessing several different websites and then returning with evidence of activities undertaken. A client specific account that a case officer can access would provide that structure required which could be tailored so as not to overwhelm the client. At present a site like CareersPortal is so full of information (all useful) that it may seem like “too much” to an already overwhelmed Jobseeker, particularly the longer term unemployed.

(Anonymous, November 2015)

Identified and agreed was a current gap in effective accessible ICT guidance resources to support adults with their career development and decisions exists. Some key areas for consideration then emerged. Generally agreed was that the client/jobseeker should have complete *ownership* of their career information and that consent provided to staff to access this should be obtained. A discussion that clients should not feel railroaded into using the new resource as there is already an element of punishment. For example: a reduction in payment for those that “do not engage” with

current Department of Social Protection activation policies. The Department of Social Protection Ireland (2016) states:

Activation as its engagement with jobseekers to support them back into employment. Jobseekers are expected to fully engage with this process and use the supports offered during the activation process which might include education or training schemes, employment support schemes to help them back into the workplace, internships and other supports.

With so much information available on the CareersPortal website, members felt it is “very busy” which can be quite overwhelming for clients. There is currently a free on-line career file that is useful but limited. Any newly designed resource should be clear, user friendly and easy to navigate. It was agreed that ethically there should *be no obligation or expectation* from DSP or service perspective for the client to use these. Access through CareersPortal, an independent website was recommended so the client can withdraw access to their information at any stage. The REACH+ programme as an example of how a centralised programme/resource for guidance counsellors and students in second-level school was presented. Members provided written feedback on what they felt the new resource should include. At the end of this meeting it was agreed that in order to ensure all members had a full understanding of the resources available on the CareersPortal website I would deliver a half day training session. Some members mentioned inviting other interested colleagues to join the advisory group, which was welcomed.

I delivered the half a day training in November 2015. I had received consent from my employers to ask the group if I could track our work as part of my research for my MEd. Conscious of my potential perceived dual role now as researcher and facilitator, I was nervous and unsure of how it would be received by the group. Some new members joined and there was a total of twelve present from the services mentioned. I provided each member with an information sheet on the action research I was proposing and its meaning (Appendix 2). A consent form was provided highlighting that they would remain anonymous and could withdraw from the study at any stage (Appendix 3). I stressed that if members did not want to participate this would not affect their membership or contribution to the advisory group, our work would continue beyond my study. A scoping document outlining the proposed *MyFuture+*

development content (Appendix 5) was circulated to all members in early December 2015. It looked for feedback and any ideas for an alternative name. This first phase of collaboration was a period of “action” and communication in the form of meetings, training, e-mails and phone calls.

### **Reflection: Cycle 1: October-December 2015**

From the very formation, I observed that there was tension in the group, particularly between the qualified and non-qualified guidance providers. As facilitator, I was sensitive to this and reminded the group that “despite our different roles we are all trying to support individuals with their career progression”. Group facilitation requires listening to member’s views, so that you can help the group engage in productive conversation. I was trying to be inclusive to and engage all members. Toseland and Rivas (2005, p. 89) refer to group tension as:

Tension or conflict sometimes develops from differences among members. The worker should help the group resolve the conflict by helping the group develop norms emphasizing the importance of respect and tolerance and by mediating the differences and finding a common ground for productive work together.

There were diverse roles in the group. For example: case officers in the DSP had very little time with clients “up to twenty minutes”. Others like AEGI guidance counsellors could have “up to an hour”. Some work with individuals in a group context and others on a one-to-one basis or both. Despite the early agreed ethical issue that clients should provide their permission to share their information with the provider some felt they should *have to* engage. There was a clear difference of opinion. This was discussed and resolved whereby there would be no onus on clients to use the new tool and that it should be a voluntary process. Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p. 102) highlight that “knowledge is cognitively constructed from experience and interaction of the individual with others and the environment” and refers to Guba and Lincoln (2005, p.196) in relation to how co-researchers are initiated into the research process by facilitator or researcher and then learn through active engagement in the process. The facilitator or researcher requires emotional competence, democratic personality, and skills. I realised early on that the advisory group process whilst very productive and valuable, it was multi-layered and complex. Some members are qualified guidance



practitioners, others are not but despite this most of the members are actually in a guidance role. Involving everyone equally in the group process was fundamental to its productivity.

My diverse roles brought internal anxieties and complexities. I was a *guidance practitioner, facilitator, observer, participant and now a researcher* within the group. An extract from my group supervision notes captures the sense of relief I felt having secured their consent:

I am so relieved that they agreed to allow me to research our work to develop new resources to support adult clients! I felt so vulnerable asking the group for their permission. I now have two identities – a professional and a researcher – this is a new experience for me and an unsettling one. I am now worried about how I will research this group process? How will I ground it in theory? Have I taken on too much? I am a practical person, not an academic and so whilst I like the idea of action-research and generating knowledge by doing I am unsure of how this will work? However, I am delighted that I have managed to get a group of professionals together from different services and perspectives to work together to develop a new suite of resources. This, I feel has potential in offering a more consistent service to individuals that really need it. Getting the input and consent for my research from representatives from these four services in itself is a mini success!

(Group supervision journal notes, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2015)

Alvesson & Scöldbberg (2010, pp. 6-7) discuss the idea of “reflective empirical research” and of the importance of reflection in planning, interpreting and writing during the research process. Thinking and writing became crucial for me to try and make sense of this action research process.

#### **4.2 “Innovation” – staying together: cycle 2**

***“In this wan light, even trees seem groundless.***

***In a while, it will be night, but nothing***

***Here seems to believe the relief of dark.***

***You are in this time of interim***

***Where everything seems withheld”***

## **Cycle 2: January-February 2016**

This verse captures my growing confusion and frustration in this phase. The development of the new resource was due to take place during December 2015 and January 2016. Due to staff shortages in work the timeframe was delayed. The previous phase had felt like such a time of action; meeting and communicating consistently with advisory group members. This caused a number of issues for me both personally and professionally. I felt I had brought the group process to a certain stage and could not progress beyond this until the new career tool was ready. The prospect of seeing a development in the lifetime of the thesis was fading fast. I was also concerned that with time delays group momentum would most probably suffer and the group would fall apart. Conscious of this, I kept in contact with members to try and keep the channels of communication open and the group work alive. Three of the original advisory group members had changed role and were no longer in a position to be involved. I expressed my concerns through supervision and reflected on what was happening within me on this research journey. Action Research is concerned with both taking action and generating new knowledge or research. The balance can be tipped when the unforeseen occurs. It was at this point I felt very concerned about the lack of action happening with the new development.

In February 2016, the development work of the new ICT career tool had started, but it was by this time that I hoped the new tool would have been already launched. I had met with my colleague and in depth we discussed all the feedback received and agreed that two versions of the new resource would exist; one for jobseeker and the other for an adult learner. Both client and learner would provide permission for their associated service to view their information by assigning themselves to a staff member. Both types of on-line career files had similar content. The adult learner had the additional work placement or “workxperience” app. It was agreed that a first draft of the resource would be ready to be launched with the advisory group members on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2016. Within the Youthreach service a number of staff work with groups of young adults so in terms of trialling the pilot with their service new members were invited to get involved. The new development would be mobile compatible and users could access the resources from any mobile device.

## Reflection: Cycle 2: January-February 2016

I feel I started off in this research in a practical mode. I was doing a lot but not really connecting with the literature. Now, I feel things have reversed – the practical bit has slowed down. The programme has been stalled. I am ‘a doer’. I’m worried the group will fall apart. The question for me from my reading is how ICT integrates into holistic adult guidance? In the group supervision to-day they said don’t worry about the new tool being ready – sometimes you bring things to a stage in research where others can then continue - but how will I get an insight into if the new tool is helpful?

(Group supervision journal notes, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2016)

I note from my journal that it was at this time I was deep within the literature in relation to ICT and adult guidance. I found a lot of research undertaken in other countries in relation to “computer-assisted guidance systems” (CAGS). I could not locate reports or previous research on ICT adult guidance resources within the adult guidance practice from an Irish perspective. From a policy perspective, there is a clear requirement for practitioners to have well developed ICT skills. Much of the literature revealed there is whilst there a vast array of ICT career information available to adults, it unambiguous and difficult to capture its impact. The prospect of developing a new centralised ICT career learning tool and undertaking a focused study on this was really interesting to me. Exploring what has been researched and written in relation to my topic and locating this within my research approach was becoming more complex. This phase for me felt like less action and more about searching for literature, reading, thinking, reflecting, writing and trying to make sense of my growing confusion in the research.

### 4.3 “Integration” – working together: cycle 3

*“The old is not old enough to have died away;*

*The new is still too young to be born.*

*What is being transfigured here is your mind*

*And it is difficult and slow to become new,*

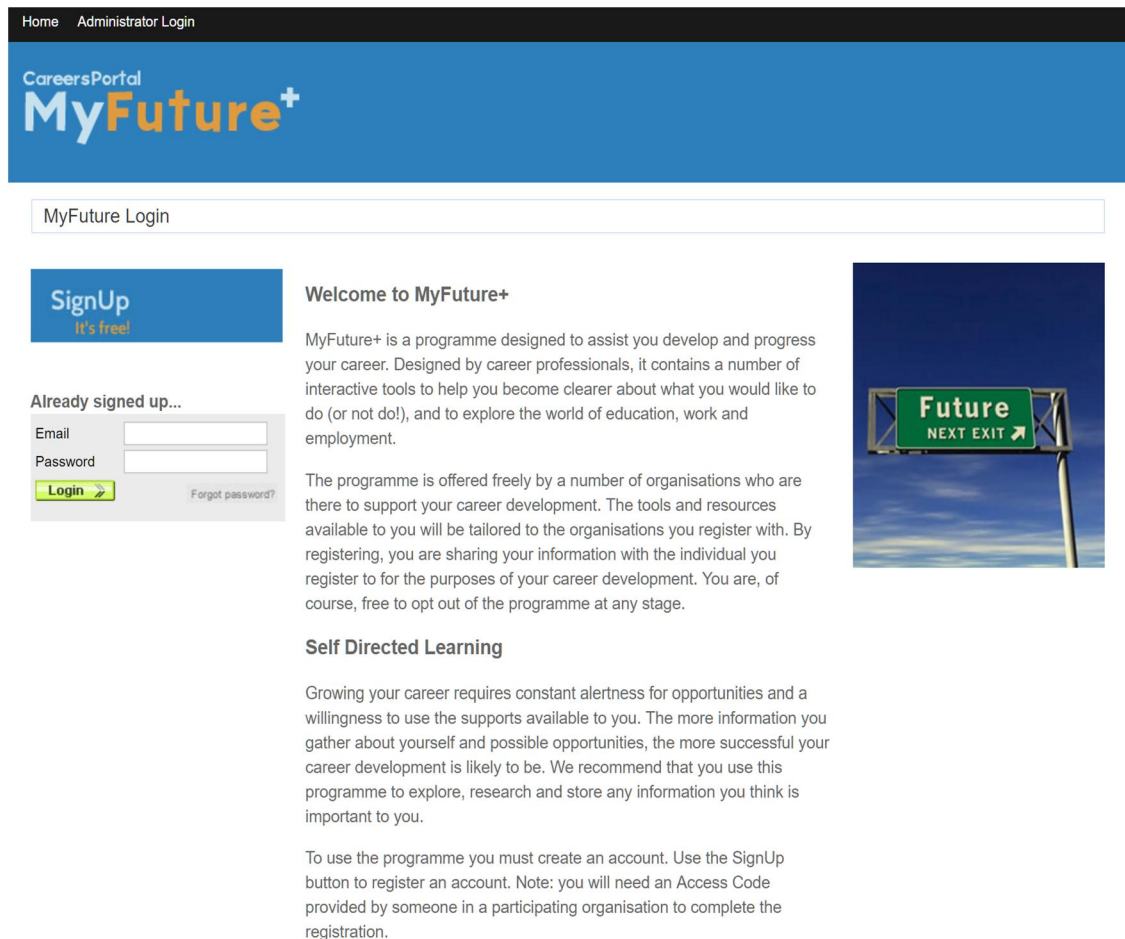
*The more faithfully you can endure here,*

*The more refined your heart will become*

*For your arrival in the new dawn”.*

### Action: Cycle 3: March-June 2016

The pilot *MyFuture+* was launched with the advisory group members on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2016. The aim was to trial the new resource for three months until the end of June. A training session on how to navigate and use the on-line resources and tools was provided. Staff from Youthreach who are adult educators joined the pilot.



The screenshot shows the homepage of the MyFuture+ website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'Home' and 'Administrator Login'. Below this is a blue header with the 'CareersPortal MyFuture+' logo. A search bar labeled 'MyFuture Login' is positioned below the header. The main content area is divided into three columns. The left column features a 'SignUp It's free!' button and a login form with fields for 'Email' and 'Password', a 'Login' button, and a 'Forgot password?' link. The middle column contains a 'Welcome to MyFuture+' heading, a paragraph describing the program's purpose, a paragraph about the program being offered freely, and a 'Self Directed Learning' section with a paragraph on career development. The right column displays a photograph of a green road sign that reads 'Future NEXT EXIT' with an arrow pointing right.

**Figure 7:** *MyFuture+* Login/Sign-Up Homepage: [www.myfuture.ie](http://www.myfuture.ie).

*MyFuture+* is distinct from the CareersPortal website with its own website address. Despite a standalone programme it also integrates with the CareersPortal website in relation to career and education information and resources relevant to adults. This means that it has a cleaner and less 'busy' shop front than the main website but at the same time integrates with useful career information through the 'apps' or activities.

The screenshot displays the MyFuture+ website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'CareersPortal', 'Log Out', and 'My Career File' on the left, and 'Sharon Test' on the right. Below this is a blue header with the 'MyFuture+' logo. The main content area is titled 'My Career File' and is divided into several sections:

- My Profile...:** A section titled 'My Career Sector(s)' with three categories: 'Accountancy & Taxation', 'Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations', and 'Animals & Veterinary Science'.
- My Apps...:** A grid of application tiles including 'My Career Sectors', 'Career Interest Profiler (CIP)', 'Personality Profiler', 'My CareerPad', 'Career Skills', 'Register Placement', 'Work Experience Diary', 'Work Placement', and 'Diary'.
- My Top Career Interests:** Three categories: 'Social', 'Enterprising', and 'Administrative'.
- My Personality Profile:** A circular diagram with 'IDEALIST' and 'THEORIST' labels, showing a profile with segments in blue, green, and orange.
- Career Toolbox...:** A grid of tools including 'Career Research', 'Job Profiles', 'Career Videos', 'Job Hunting', and 'Courses'.
- Employment News:** A list of news items with dates, such as 'INVITATION to EPSO Recruitment Campaign Launch' (June 8, 2016) and '19 New Jobs for Dublin with Alien Technology Transfer' (June 7, 2016).
- Advertisements:** Two banners for 'YOUTHREACH' and 'SKILLS TO SUCCEED ACADEMY', and 'Online editor europass CV & Cover Letter Creator'.

Figure 8: MyFuture+ Test/Sample Account [www.myfuture.ie](http://www.myfuture.ie).

As the weeks passed, only some of the members had set clients or learners up with access. I was becoming more and more anxious about my research and this thesis. Just writing about the advisory group process for me felt incomplete. It was important to me to have *the voice* of the client present in my research. I kept in contact consistently with members, asking if they needed anything from me to support the implementation. In early April, I went to one of the Youthreach centres to set up a group learners on the pilot. It was decided to increase the capacity of the pilot. In early April, it expanded it to include three additional AEGI services in other locations and one adult guidance private practitioner to gather more feedback from an adult guidance practitioner perspective.

### Reflection: Cycle 3: March-June 2016

During the launch of *MyFuture+*, I noticed tensions between qualified and non-qualified adult guidance staff continued. One member expressed a concern that the resource could be potentially viewed “as a replacement for guidance, we are already struggling to maintain our guidance roles”. I had been thinking a lot about how this new tool would be perceived by the adult guidance community. My research had already alerted me to the fact that ICT can be viewed as “reductionist” and can be viewed as threatening to the role of adult guidance professionals. As a guidance counsellor, I was sensitive to this and reassured this member that this was a *career learning tool*. I explained the purpose of the tool was not to hinder but rather help the adult guidance relationship. I mentioned it would not be suitable or useful to all adults. Reflecting on my thoughts and beliefs throughout this process I realised that as a guidance practitioner, I seek out ways to bring about positive change in my client’s lives. There are a general set of principles that accompany action research including:

The need for justice and democracy, the right of all people to speak and be heard, the right of each individual to show how and why they have given extra attention to their learning in order to improve their work, the deep need to experience truth and beauty in our personal and professional lives.

(McNiff, 2002, p. 8)

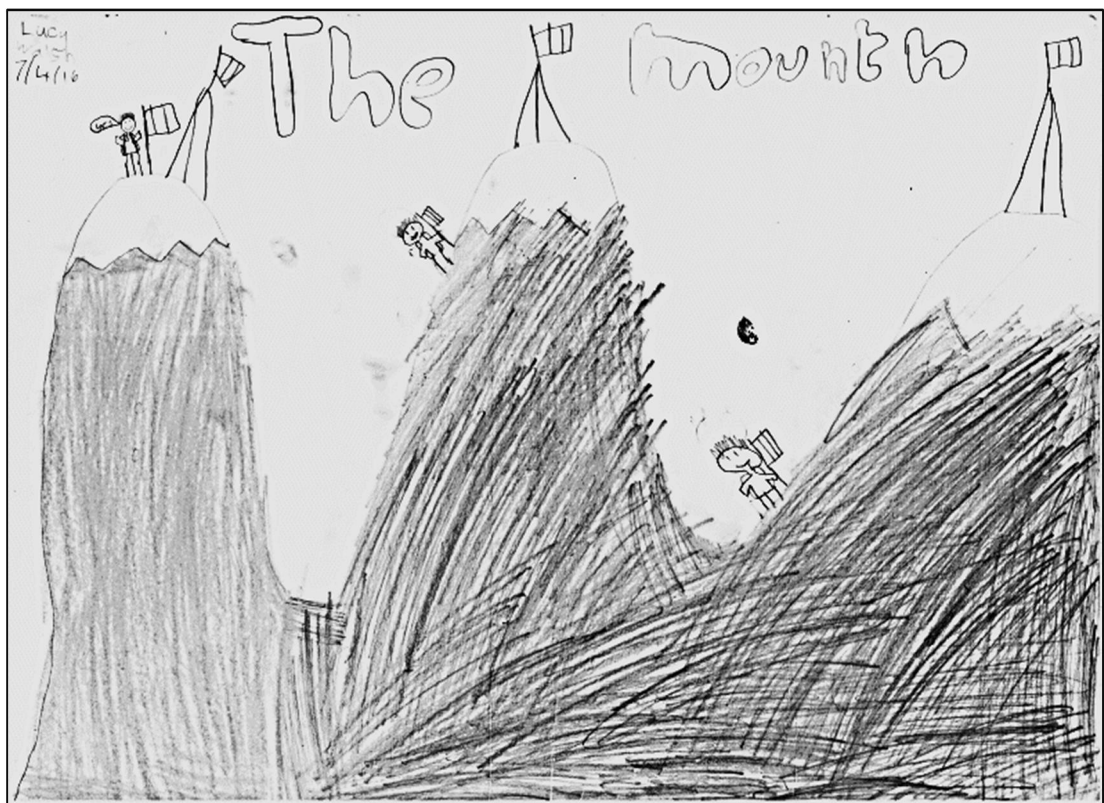
It is clear that my personal and professional identity was driving this research. I was very eager to capture some feedback from the clients that would be trialling this new tool. I was delighted that the pilot was launched but conscious that I had limited time to gather feedback from members and their clients or learners. The implementation of the pilot was not moving as quickly as I wanted. In mid-April 2016, it was the final group supervision session in the MEd. On this day my perspective changed. For the first time in the process, things felt less confusing in my role as a *researcher*. A reflexive extract from my personal journal written that night relays the events of that day; I had an epiphany.

I came home to-day from college upset and angry with myself. In group supervision, others are not only way ahead of me but their approach and writing is creative and interesting. I was thinking why have good insights for other people’s research topic but not for my own? Why did I decide to go with this action research, I’m running out of time! I have been relying on others for my research; for the development, to use the new tool – I can’t see how I am



going to make the deadline! I met with David after the group supervision – we went into the thesis room. My head was in a spin – how am I going to have a thesis on the shelf in two months’ time? He told me to write my thesis like I would present it. I was thinking about that driving home, how can I do that? When I came in, I noticed a plant Lucy had grown in school was dead – I had neglected to water it. I was so annoyed with myself – couldn’t even keep a plant alive! I threw it in the bin but the bin was overflowing and when I went to pull the bin out the whole bag burst all over the floor. That is exactly what this feels like; a mess. When I was cleaning it up, feeling sorry for myself, Lucy came in (age 7) “Hi Mam, I drew this picture for you to-day”. Pulling myself together I looked at it. “It’s a Mountain Mam, we sang a song in school to-day about a Mountain”. I asked her “Why is that person at the very end of the Mountain?” It reminds me of how I feel, so behind – and everyone else way ahead. She said “Sometimes Mam you have to camp for a night or two before you can keep going”. In that moment, something changed in me – she was right. I realised I needed to stop trying so hard to make things happen - to give myself a break. This picture will have to feature somewhere in my thesis. It would be dishonest of me not to write about my journey as a researcher – not real in an attempt to make it tidy.

(Journal Notes, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2016)



**Figure 9:** “Lucy’s picture<sup>1</sup>: My Mountain” a pencil drawing: on 7<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

<sup>1</sup> I am extremely grateful to my daughter Lucy for allowing me to use her pencil drawing in this thesis and for reminding me of the importance of reflexivity.

This conversation with my daughter helped me to stand back from my research and ask myself what is really happening here? McCormack (2015, p.76) describes epiphany moments as “moments of significance that serve to refresh and reenliven my practice. Epiphany moments are moments of revelation that emerge often from challenging or troubling experience”.

#### **4.4 “The Beyond Activation”: Maynooth conference**

This epiphany informed what happened next. There was an upcoming conference in Maynooth for adult guidance practitioners. I was asked to present a short workshop at this. The title had been decided the previous year in relation to “the importance of ICT tools within the adult guidance process.” I had been thinking about the delays in some of the members implementing *MyFuture+* and about potential issues. I have been aware in my work of the lack of confidence that can exist using ICT in adult guidance practice. This research encouraged me to think about this issue in a deeper way. Capturing feedback from clients was not going to happen if there was an issue around dissemination. After all, the advisory group members were essentially the gatekeepers of *MyFuture+*.

The aim of the Maynooth “Beyond Activation Conference” was to create a reflexive practitioner space. I decided to take a risk and engage in the space as a colleague and a researcher. At the beginning of the workshop, I told the delegates about my research and asked for their consent to gather some of their feedback. Rather, than use the title of my workshop as a statement, I decided to turn it into a question. I took a step back, went back to basics. This is something I should have done earlier on in the research. But, it was only through the research process that this emerged. Eleven delegates provided me with short questionnaires and consented to have their comments appear in my study (Appendix 11). These will be examined in the next chapter.



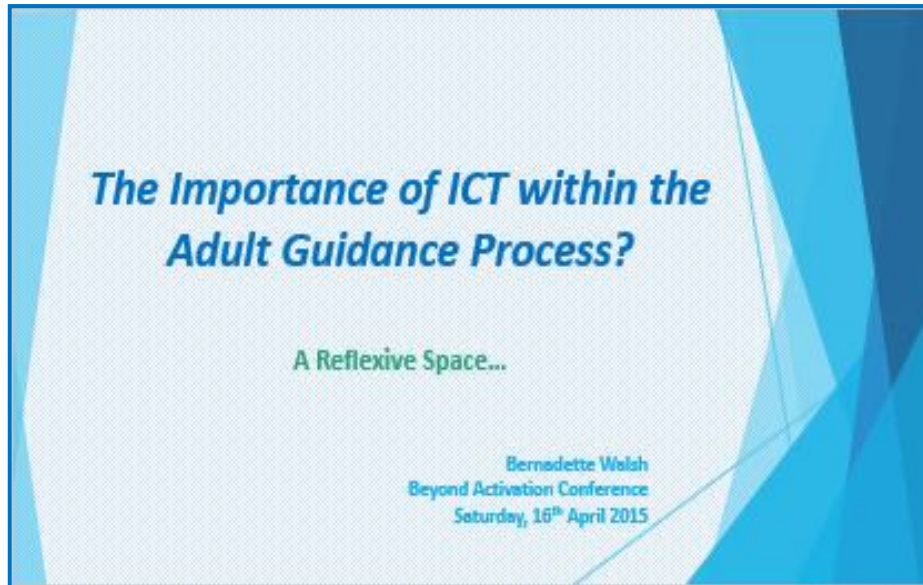


Figure 10: Slide 1: My Workshop Presentation: *Beyond Activation Conference*: 16<sup>th</sup> April 2016

#### 4.5 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the reflexive action research process of *action* and *reflection*. These are described as three distinct yet interlinked cycles of; collaboration, innovation and integration. In early May 2016, I conducted two focus groups with eighteen young adult learners and received short feedback questionnaires from them (Appendix 7 and 8). I interviewed three staff members for twenty minutes (two of which were audio recorded) to get some feedback from an adult education and guidance perspective. I received feedback forms from two adult guidance practitioners and three adult educators (Appendix 9 and 10). In the next chapter, I will examine the data collated from the conference, interviews, questionnaires and focus groups in relation to an analysis of *the themes* that emerged. Central to this will be an exploration of *MyFuture+* and how it fits in with Offer's (1997) computer-assisted guidance system model.

## CHAPTER 5: “MYFUTURE+: LEARNING AND RELATIONSHIP POTENTIAL”

*“Careers work is learning work, whether we are working one-to-one with a client or with a group of individuals. We all learn about the self in a process of construction, sometimes as an active agent...at other times placed in the position of experiencing an event passively, within structural forces outside of our locus of control”*

(Reid, 2016, p. 105)

### 5.0 Implementation and implications of the pilot study

In Chapter 3, I discussed a career learning and ICT computer-assisted guidance systems conceptual framework. I will now position the *MyFuture+* career learning tool within this model. Key findings from the data collated from the Maynooth conference, interviews, focus groups and questionnaires will be presented. In light of this, I will examine and provide an analysis of the *emerging themes* and consider their potential in the context of adult career development. Career learning is not the sole responsibility or unique to the guidance relationship. Rather, individuals learn about themselves in relation to career in many ways. Ali and Graham (1996, p. 2) make the point that “careers guidance is not the exclusive preserve of careers officers... individuals seek support from many informal sources”. Seeking innovative ways to support individuals learn about themselves in relation to lifelong career promotes career management opportunities. *MyFuture+* is one example of this as a new ICT career learning tool in 21<sup>st</sup> century adult education and guidance practice in Ireland.

### 5.1 *MyFuture+* - positioning it within CAGS

I have discussed Offer’s (1997) European review on computer-assisted guidance systems and their links with Law’s DOTS or career learning and decision-making model. Within the limitations of this research, I am not in a position to go into detail about all elements of this new career learning tool. However, I will examine how *MyFuture+* fits within the typology or classification system as described by Offer (1997, p. 8-9) previously demonstrated in an up-dated re-illustrated model (p. 37) by Burrowes (2016). Each of the activities in the new tool are referred to as ‘apps’ because of their mobile compatibility. *MyFuture+* currently links with seven of the eight typology areas.

CareersPortal Log Out My Career File Sharon Test

CareersPortal  
**MyFuture+**

My Career File

**My Profile...**

**My Career Sector(s)**

- Accountancy & Taxation
- Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations
- Animals & Veterinary Science

**My Top Career Interests**

- Social
- Enterprising
- Administrative

**My Personality Profile**

**My Apps...**

|                   |                                 |                       |                |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| My Career Sectors | Career Interest Profiler (CPIP) | Personality Profiler  | My CareerPad   |
| Career Sectors    | Interest Profiler               | Personality           | Career Notepad |
| Career Skills     | Register Placement              | Work Experience Diary |                |
| Career Skills     | Work Placement                  | Diary                 |                |

**Career Toolbox...**

|                 |                 |               |              |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|--------------|
| Career Research | Job Profiles    | Career Videos | Job Hunting  |
| Career Research | Occupations A-Z | Career Videos | Finding Jobs |
| Courses         |                 |               |              |

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See previous **Figure 7**.

**(1) Self-Assessment**

These ICT activities help assess yourself and provide a unique profile in relation to the world of work. The pilot *MyFuture+* offers the following “Apps” or activities consistent with this type including: career sectors, career interest profiler (CPIP), personality profiler and career skills. All of these tools are non-psychometric (aptitude) based.



*Career Sectors App*

This activity integrates information on the CareersPortal website allowing the individual to research up-to-date, relevant information including related occupations, courses and labour market information on the 33 most prominent sectors in Ireland. Users can save sectors of interests to their profile or add in ones they have experience of working in.



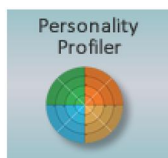
*Careers Interest Profiler App*

The CPIP is based on the work of the American psychologist John Holland's *Interest Inventory*, whereby individuals are provided with their top three interests from a potential six, known as *RIASEC* classification system (Holland, 1997). The CPIP has been expanded to reflect a more Irish context. For example, it includes the "Naturalist" interest reflective of agriculture and farming industry in Ireland (see table below). When users have undertaken the profiler, they are also offered to filter their results by career sectors and job zones. The Career Sectors are unique to Ireland and reflect the world of work here. The use of job zones (1-5) is also the first time such a concept has been brought into Ireland and integrated into the national occupations database. Carton (2016, p. 2) states:

It is important to note that instrument was not designed to identify any 'norms' in the population, or to measure any characteristics that could be used to compare individuals. It is solely designed to identify the relative 'strength' of interests for an individual. It is therefore not a psychometric instrument, and does not claim to measure any supposed 'real' attributes. Holland's Interest categories are useful, but not "real" in the normal sense of the word (Appendix 12).

| Holland Interests | CPIP Interests |
|-------------------|----------------|
| Realist           | Realist        |
|                   | Naturalist     |
| Investigative     | Investigative  |
| Artistic          | Creative       |
|                   | Linguistic     |
| Social            | Social         |
| Enterprising      | Enterprising   |
| Conventional      | Administrative |

**Figure 11:** CareersPortal CPIP: Comparison between Holland’s and CPIP interest types. CareersPortal information sheet (Appendix 12).



*Personality Profiler App*

Developed in 2008, by an Irish psychologist John Carton, this assessment is based on the work of Carl Jung’s Jungian psychological types (Jung, 1971). Intuition - (Improvisors), Sensing - (Stabilisers), Thinking - (Theorists) and Feeling - (Idealists). It includes the *Myers Briggs Type Indicator* which is also the foundation of the *Keirsey Temperament Types* (Keirsey, 1998). It focuses on the four common areas outlined and does not go into the more complex sixteen types. Like the CPIP it does not identify any “norms”. Along with the CPIP it provides another layer of self-exploration in the context of career suitability. However, this does not integrate with the occupational database.



*Career Skills App*

Ireland’s Skills Strategy (2015) forms an integral part of the government’s long term economic plan to build a sustainable economy provide full employment opportunities. A key objective is that “education and training providers will place a stronger focus on providing skills development opportunities that are relevant to the needs of learners,

society and the economy.” (p. 10). This app brings the user through a series of statements whereby they can rate their people, task and interpersonal skills as underdeveloped, developed or well developed.

## **(2) Matching Systems**

ICT tools that match you to occupations or courses. The *CPIP* in *MyFuture+* provides both from your interest profiler results i.e. occupational (from over 950 profiled jobs) and course matching (National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland Levels 4-8) from the Further Education and Higher Education sectors, integrated from the CareersPortal website.

## **(3) Information Retrieval**

As above (2) in relation to occupational and course databases.

## **(4) Games and Simulations**



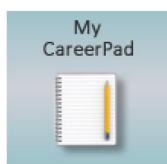
Access to **Skills to Succeed Academy**

These support an interactive learning environment in relation to career. *MyFuture+* includes the multinational company’s Accenture (2013) “skills to succeed academy”. This is a highly interactive tool aimed at young people, who are unemployed, to assist them to prepare for, get and keep a job. It includes performance simulations (where they can watch real life people in interview or work situations) and computer based training (multi-media to teach the skills needed) activities. Accenture have given permission to CareersPortal to include this resource in *MyFuture+*.

## **(5) Decision-Aids**

Through exploring the activities through the self-assessments in *MyFuture+* and linking these to potential jobs, labour market information and courses, individuals have up-to-date relevant individualised information to assist with career planning.

## (6) Dedicated Word Processors



Writing a good CV (Curriculum Vitae), letter of application, filling in application forms are things that need to be learned. *MyFuture+* links to “Europass” and also provides a “CareerPad” that individuals can save word files in.

## (7) Computer Based Training

Already discussed in point (4).

## (8) Psychometric Testing

This is the only type that *MyFuture+* does not include. This was not requested by the advisory group members.

It is evident within this short overview of some of the “apps” or ICT career tools available in *MyFuture+* that seven of the eight classifications of Offer’s (1997) CAGS typologies are addressed. He describes this type of ICT careers programme as “multi-functional”, or “any software programme may include functions that belong to more than one category...and fit several different categories.” (p. 9).

## 5.2 *MyFuture+* integration: emerging themes

I will now provide verbatim quotes from the data collated in the interviews, questionnaires and focus groups. These include verbal and written feedback from adult learners, their adult educators, and guidance counsellors. Based on these findings I will analyse key *themes* that strongly emerged.

### **Theme: A tool that encourages self-exploration and career awareness**

The following quotes depict how the pilot encouraged this with the **young adult learners**:

“I learned a lot about my personality and stuff that would suit me in my future like jobs and courses.”

“I like the interest profiler as it gave me a better insight to what jobs I should target to my personality.”

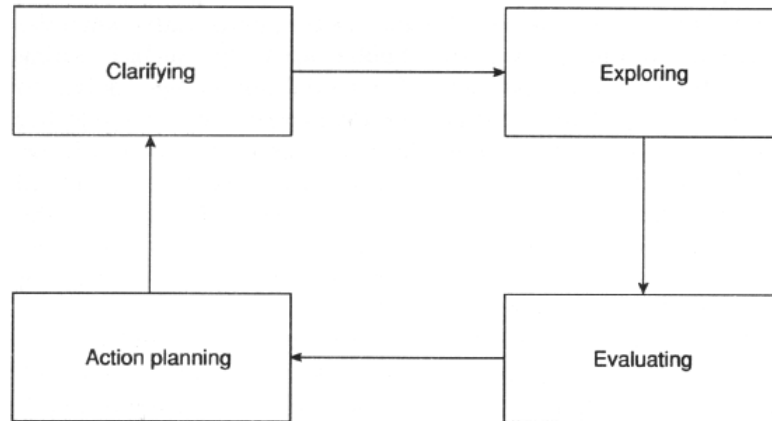
“I learned that I have a keen interest in lots of different areas of work like retail, Garda, sports and fitness. Now I am looking at these types of work.”

**An Adult Guidance Counsellor** perspective (who has access to their career file):

The programme offers a career file, assessments and the students have responded well to the resource. It has been useful in my role because I have *a foundation*, as a starting point based on the assessments and career searches the students have completed – the assessments are the *building blocks*. For me to be able to come in and look at what they have done...so you know it's kind of a starting point with them.....they might find it difficult to interact and you can go in and, you now have something to talk about, you have a focus, you can see what careers they have researched; their interest assessment, their skills, their personality. MyFuture+ definitely starts that first step.

This clearly demonstrates that the new tool engaged the learners in a process of self-assessment and self-exploration in relation to career. From an adult guidance perspective, it reinforced the potential of the tool in encouraging the initial step of clients looking at themselves as unique individuals. Ali and Graham (1996, p. 150) mention how effective computer-assisted guidance systems can be as part of the *exploration stage* and can be incorporated at later stages in the career counselling model.





**Figure 12: Ali and Graham (1996, p. 46) “The Model for a Counselling Approach”**

This model is useful to consider in demonstrating the potential of ICT career learning tools within the exploration phase in the guidance relationship. Self-knowledge and being aware of what is available (career and course opportunities) can inform career decisions making. I argue that this in itself is very often not enough for clients to then move to making career choices and decisions. Support from a guidance counsellor is highly beneficial at this stage of the learning process for clients. Egan (1998, pg. 116) argues that “assessment makes sense to the degree that it contributes to learning, to increasing the client’s options.....assessment, then, is not something helpers do to clients...rather, it is a kind of learning in which, ideally both client and helper participate.”

### **Theme: Career Learning and Development**

#### **Learner quotes:**

“I learned something new about myself while using *MyFuture+*, I learned that I could go to the army and be a recruit in the army and I think that’s great to know.”

“I think that it helped with looking for what you’re interested in or what you want to do, it also is good to know there’s so many jobs to see and look into, this also helps make up your mind.”

“I learned what skills I have and what careers might suit me.”

“I’m more focused on what I want in life now.”

Career learning and decisions do not necessarily happen in a linear way. Reid (2015) describes how career learning and development is introduced for a range of situations, whereby individuals are supported with their learning about *self* and *career*. So, whilst ICT career tools may offer an opportunity for learning about self and career, supporting individuals to navigate the decision-making process often requires exploration with a skilled helper. A quote from an **Adult Guidance** perspective highlights *the collaborative way* in which the new resource has the potential to inform and enhance the guidance relationship:

I do a lot of activities with them, you know like the “vision board” and they plan what they might like for the future and you know they might put their house, children and jobs you know. I feel *MyFuture+* is part of that it is about “MyFuture” and it’s about *planning for their future*, so when days are hard and times are tough and they’re like why am I here? They go in and they have their file and you have your assessments and your career searches – you have your dream.... I think it’s a fantastic resource.

An **Adult Educator** also refers to how the new tool informed career learning and development within the work experience module:

They are coming to you and saying “Well this is what I want to do” so they are coming and letting you know! Like we had one guy that was kind of looking at joinery. I am not saying that he wouldn’t be good at that, he absolutely would be, but through the research he did for the mock interview, through *MyFuture+* and through the searches, we really started to look at engineering as well.

### **Theme: Promoting individual career options, confidence and choices**

I will now illustrate some written quotes from the **learners** who participated in this study to demonstrate this:

“I think *MyFuture+* is great, it gives you so many options around your area and it’s also very quick with lots of choices.”

“I like the way it showed all different job ideas.”

“I liked the way you can search for courses and jobs by filter so you can choose different areas of work and where you are looking to travel.”

“I understand the different jobs now and am becoming more interested in them.”

One **Adult Educator** described it as:

An interactive tool that allows learners to view their skills, education and work opportunities. They can research occupations and see what’s involved in these positions, along with further educational options.....certainly, it would have given them *confidence* definitely in terms of options of the future, what possibilities there is, that’s really, really important for our learners that idea of the QQI level 4 leading onto level 5. We would be constantly reminding them of that. So, to go and actually use a site where that’s reinforced that idea that they can search on it and *they* can see their options. It’s just brilliant for them.

These quotes describe how the learners experienced the tool as a platform to become more aware of educational and employment opportunities. Law refers to this in terms of the DOTS Model as opportunity awareness. He explains his career learning theory in relation to the internet as “sensing, shifting, focusing and understanding, these are all learning verbs emphasising *the process* rather than the content of learning” (Law, Meijers, Wijers, 2002, p. 436). This encourages individuals to gain a better understanding of the structure of the world of work, the general opportunities and their demands. From a *MyFuture+* perspective this includes self-assessment in relation to the sectors, occupations and labour market shortages. Bringing this career awareness and learning into the context of the adult guidance relationship can be very helpful. Egan (1998, p. 41) argues that:

Helping is not something that helpers do to clients, it is a process that helpers and clients work through together...both have to work to do in the problem management and opportunity-development stages and steps...helping is a two-person *team* effort in which helpers need to do their part and clients theirs.

### **Theme: Creating a safe and inclusive group learning space**

One of the things that emerged from my interviews that I had not anticipated was the impact of *MyFuture+* on helping to facilitate a sense of safety and inclusiveness within both the adult learning group and guidance relationship.

I think when they are in a group doing an assessment, I think they feel more secure... whereas sometimes on a one-to-one, you know, maybe I'm sitting there waiting for them to complete it...it can be more difficult for them, more challenging. I think it can be a bit stressful for them and maybe they just want to get it done. Whereas in a group they are with their peers and it's you know, kind of more relaxing I think. I have felt in the past when I have done one-to-ones that there can be a bit of strain on them, where in a group there is that sense of belonging, being one of the pack, a security in numbers.

**(Adult Guidance Counsellor)**

I found it very safe, you know they knew the ones they were linking to and they weren't going to end up on something that wasn't relevant, that wasn't legitimate.....Obviously with our learners, they may start at the beginning of a course, but obviously because of different levels, attendance and all of that, you are always going to end up pretty much with everyone in the room doing something slightly different. So, there is a lot of management around that. MyFuture was really useful because essentially they all felt that they were all doing the same thing, so say for example, you know Learner X, you would have seen today, he would have gone extremely far, he is extremely quick. And then, Learner Y, he would need a lot of support. But at the same time going into the room, they were both using the same tool, were both doing the same thing.

**(Adult Educator)**

The guidance relationship is a learning one, the potential for adult education in engaging adults to learn about themselves in relation to career learning is evident here. I will discuss this in terms of implications for practice in the next chapter.

### **Theme: Empowering clients to become more proactive in the guidance process**

The following quotes from **adult guidance counsellors** describe how they perceived the new career tool helpful for clients in their practice:

I especially like that clients can work on various elements of research, independently between sessions on a reliable user friendly site and that all research can be recorded and accessed during the one-to-one session. The fact that CV, notes made on research, questions on careers, job searches, reflections etc. are stored on the one site is invaluable. It encourages clients to reflect and thoughts, feelings, questions which might otherwise be forgotten are recorded and may be insightful when it comes to guidance meeting. It also can help a client reflect pre-meeting on what they want from meeting with guidance counsellor.

My time is very limited with them so they are doing the work, and it's handing the power to them. You know guidance practice is an equal but it's kind of putting it back to them, letting them set the pace and exploring their path.

These quotes indicate how this ICT tool integrated well into practice and echo themes of *collaboration and empowerment*. Essentially, this is what the guidance relationship is about; facilitating the personal, social and vocational growth of clients outlined in Chapter 3. Peavy (1997, p. 180) proposed that the aim of assessment from a constructivist viewpoint is “to open up avenues of movement, promote empowerment, support transitions, and assist the client gain eligibility for participation”. The *MyFuture+* self-assessments encouraged this process, especially within the adult education environment. A quote by an **adult educator** echoes this:

They are discovering it themselves because they are actually going and filling in the profiles by themselves. They feel it’s their information, they are telling you! They are coming to you and saying well this is what I’m going to do – so they are coming and letting you know. This is what I got, not you telling me, I’m telling you.

Yates (2014, p. 156) states:

The philosophy behind coaching is rooted into empowering and enabling, not doing things on behalf of our clients. If we give our clients a piece of information, it may help them in that situation, but we have not enhanced their self-efficacy in their own ability to research or encouraged them to develop skills that might help them in the future.

The comments from both the adult educators and adult guidance counsellors demonstrate *MyFuture+* tool as a means of encouraging clients to become more actively engaged in the career learning process. Offer (1997, p. 12) describes how self-assessment can support client self-efficacy and independent career decision-making:

Clients need to gain awareness of themselves in terms of interests, abilities, personal values and so on, and to relate this awareness to comprehensive, up-to-date and accurate information on the opportunities (courses, occupations and so on) available to them.

Referring to autonomous career decision-making he states that clients then need:

To decide between alternative options using a decision making process. Finally the reach to implement the decision by applying for a job or a course, and to cope personally with the changes in lifestyle...a person that can successfully do all these things might also be defined as an autonomous individual (ibid.).

I argue that whilst ICT career learning tools can encourage clients to become more proactive and engaged within the career decision making process, a meaning-making

constructivist or narrative approach in the adult guidance relationships is equally as important. A collaborative, blended approach between ICT career tools and face-to-face adult guidance provides much synergy and potential.

### **Theme: Increasing capacity in adult education & guidance practice**

I was struck by how this **adult educator** referred to how the pilot provided a platform to work with more learners in a more efficient way:

It was really good for me in terms of being able to see what they had actually done and have a record without having to open up a lot of documents or have them e-mail me things, for me that's the way I normally would work. I found I could certainly comfortably work with a larger group, because there was a tool, it was much easier to facilitate it. I was very quickly able to look at the profile and very quickly say well you need to explore three different courses that are accessible to you, so that's the terminology coming from the work experience module, I can actually use that terminology, they've seen it.

A quote by an **adult guidance counsellor** also alluded to this:

I see this tool as being core of my guidance sessions. We do a lot of assessments in the beginning getting them ready for the full time programme and I have a lot of young people to get through in the centres I work in, and I feel to have a career file on each student where they can put in the ground work you know that the foundation is there.

There is clear evidence of the potential synergy between adult education and adult guidance practice. Adult education career focused modules such as work experience support learners in a group setting to prepare and plan in relation to career. Capturing this exploration through a career learning tool can then inform the guidance relationship in a positive and productive way.

### **Theme: Proposed improvements and changes: literacy and presentation**

There were many suggestions made from the young adult learners, adult educators and adult guidance counsellors in relation to improvements that could be made to the pilot. These included visual changes in terms of the use of colour, layout, literacy issues particularly with the career skills app and content. Quotes included:

"A key piece of feedback from me and that is to have a lot of consultation in terms of literacy and that would include the use of font, the use of language, the use of terminology". **(Adult Educator)**

“I would like more quizzes and listening work” **(Learner)**

“I didn’t like the career skills app – the language was hard” (Focus group: Learner comment) “A different style to the background, more apps, easier to login”. **(Learner)**

A full evaluation of the new tool will take place at the end of June 2016 and based on all feedback *MyFuture+* will be adapted and enhanced to reflect improvements.

### **Theme: Lack of ICT Confidence in Practice**

I have previously mentioned the issue amongst many adult guidance practitioners in relation to ICT confidence. The following quote reinforces this point:

Using *MyFuture+* in my practice made me think about how we can enable our clients more, also about being up to date with technology. Young people access most of their information online. I am not good on use of apps etc. Made me think about the great resource ICT can be and of the need to upskill in this area.

**(Adult Guidance Counsellor)**

Most young people expect that for guidance counsellors to be effective helpers that they are in tune with their technological world. It is clear that this guidance counsellor recognises the potential of ICT in guidance practice but demonstrates a need for on-going training in this area to improve confidence and knowledge. “The careers guidance workforce has many of the same generic ICT skill development issues as the general adult population” (Bimrose and Barnes, 2010, p. 4)

### **5.3 The Maynooth conference findings**

I have discussed how my reflexive process forced me to take a step back and think about how adult guidance practitioners integrate ICT into their practice. I took the opportunity to explore how my peers viewed the importance of ICT in their adult guidance practice at my workshop (Appendix 11). Interestingly what emerged from this is that (from the eleven participants) on a scale of 1-10 they all noted the importance of ICT as an average rating of 8. However, in terms of their confidence levels this averaged lower at 7. The main issues and challenges around provision of effective ICT adult guidance resources in their practice included; lack of time, not enough working knowledge, not feeling up-to-date, lack of training, and a need for

short user friendly assessments which address barriers for clients such as literacy issues. There was a clear indication that as practitioners they felt they had *limited capacity* in terms of their time and workload. Reid and West (2011, p. 181) refer to how in order to adopt new approaches in current guidance practices that some find it difficult to find time, space and confidence and how this highlights a “need for a safe transitional space within busy practice”. The following are some comments from the short questionnaires that address the thoughts of adult guidance counsellors on how and if ICT can be integrated into the guidance relationship in a *holistic way*. All eleven agreed that ICT could be effectively integrated:

Yes, I think so, it would be foolish not to go with it as our clients are. I think given our time constraints it could possible enhance how we work. In particular how we give out information, but there needs to be some training to take away the fear.

Yes, I believe current information is highly relevant in the guidance process, enabling clients consider options and broaden knowledge. But we need ways for guidance practitioners – usually not digital natives, to become teachers of the skills needed to use/navigate the information overload.

Yes, it is always a conversation opener even if the person has just said it doesn't match up, it still gives a piece of the puzzle.

This promotes the potential of a tool like *MyFuture+* whereby both guidance practitioner and client have access to up-to-date careers information in the career learning and decision making process. Despite the clear interest and recognised potential of ICT in holistic adult guidance practice, there exists challenges, given time and knowledge constraints of *how to integrate* it effectively into practice.

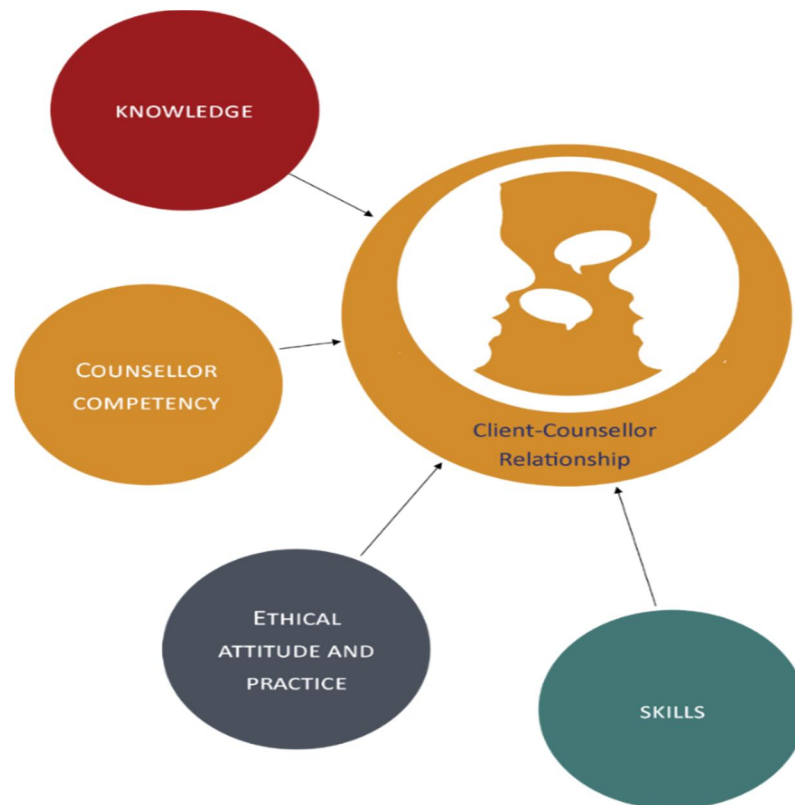
#### **5.4 The potential of ICT in modern holistic adult guidance practice**

I have no doubt from this study that ICT tools such as *MyFuture+* can be integrated into holistic adult guidance practice whilst continuing to locate the relationship as central. Watts (2001, p. 9) refers to this:

The key issue in relation to guidance is the significance attached to the relationship between the individual and the counsellor. The model could be based on a co-ordinated range of resources of which the counsellor is seen as one. Or it could place the relationship with the counsellor at the centre, viewing other resources as supports to this relationship.



The following diagram conveys my point:



**Figure 13:** Core Competencies and Professional Practice: Institute of Guidance Counsellors Ireland (2015, p.11) Adapted and Re-illustrated by Burrows A. (June 2016).

Despite the potential, one of the key issues emerging from this study is that the use of ICT can be perceived by the adult guidance community as suggestive of a substitute or *replacement* for holistic one-to-one guidance. I argue from the findings and analysis of this research that it does not have to be an all or nothing approach. ICT can enhance a collaborative learning adult guidance relationship, providing opportunities for client autonomy, empowerment and active agency. Reid states that “one distinction between career guidance and therapeutic counselling is the need for occupational information and labour market intelligence” (p. 200-2001). *MyFuture+* provides this information for both client and guidance counsellor. Highlighted here is the need to move away from the limiting discourse of regarding the adult guidance relationship as just a *psychological or therapeutic process*. Rather, central to the relationship is a learning process. ICT tools can in this instance help and not hinder the guidance process by encouraging dialogue, career decisions and management skills.

## CHAPTER 6: “IMPLICATIONS OF A METHODOLOGY OF ACTION AND REFLECTION”

*“Tell me and I forget, Teach me and I might remember, Involve me and I learn”.*

(Benjamin Franklin)

### **6.0 The end of my thesis journey and new beginnings**

This quote is reflective of the process of collaboration and involvement so true of action research and how it can influence learning and facilitate change. My research journey reinforced the importance of practising reflexivity in my work. Mayo (1999) states “Freire developed the concept of praxis. Freire’s approach seeks to combine the two activities of action and reflection.” He refers to this as “taking distance” or “coming into consciousness” (p. 63-64). I had a transformative learning experience when I discovered that my values and my life experiences have been central to this study. I gained a newfound appreciation for my story and how it has shaped and influences my integrated micro and macro professional identity. There were many challenges I experienced adopting this methodology, and at times I doubted that I would be in a position to complete this thesis. Despite this, action research offered me new insights and learning opportunities I am convinced I otherwise would not have experienced.

One of the most heartening experiences for me was the opportunity to meet with and listen to some of the young adults and interview the staff from Youthreach who were involved in the pilot. It was then that my wish to capture the voices of those that can be marginalised in society came to fruition. Asking the adult educators and guidance staff about their experiences of being part of the pilot revealed feelings of their service and their young adults “being overlooked” and how being part of the pilot offered a platform to inform change. One member said “I felt very privileged to have this opportunity....you know to advocate for the students.... and that they could pilot this and the staff all coming together.” The reality of it is that I am the privileged one. I am hopeful that as a result of this research I will continue to be a conduit between those who need the most support and include their feedback to shape new developments going forward. After all, my work and involvement with the pilot will outlive this thesis.

## 6.1 Personal and professional learning – fresh perspectives

Kitchenham (2010) discusses Mezirow's theory of transformative learning as a ten-phase process. This begins with "a disorienting dilemma" but that through critical self-reflection, on assumptions and discourse, the learner begins to validate better judgement. This leads to what is referred to as "perspective transformation" (p. 109). This is described as the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions constrain the way we see ourselves to permit a more inclusive integration of these experiences into new understandings. Daloz (1999, p. 134) describes this "we develop ways of knowing that can include more information and experience but make still finer distinctions; ways that are ever more open to new learning but integrate and pull these learnings together in more comprehensive patterns". In Chapter 4, I describe my realisation that I could not make things happen or speed the action research process up to accommodate this thesis. I learned to stand back, to see things differently and to stop trying to have idealistic outcomes and reflect honestly on what was emerging. If it had not been for my disorienting dilemmas along the way, I would not have developed fresh perspectives. In particular, the question of the importance and integration of ICT within adult guidance practice emerged very strongly for me.

This is also true of my learning of the importance of considering the many ways, outside of the adult guidance relationship, in which individual's learn about themselves in relation to career. This was significant and it expanded the study to include the pilot *MyFuture+* in the context of adult education. What emerged from this is just how beneficial group learning is in encouraging the building of career learning, development and management skills within a safe learning space. Usher and Bryant (2012, p. 118-19) discuss how action research "as a form of investigation has a strong theoretical warrant in educational contexts, in the interpretive requirement, to study the situated aspects of human action by getting involved, not simply as a participant observer but as an active change agent". They also discuss how action research more readily facilitates links between research and practice and how findings can be readily *translated* into practice. It is essential that as a researcher and interpreter of the

findings, I reflect on how my reflexive learning can be considered in relation to wider adult guidance practice. I identify the following five key areas:

**(1) Improve collaboration between adult educators and adult guidance professionals to enhance career learning opportunities**

Career learning happens in many contexts and not within a vacuum. The role of adult guidance counsellors is to facilitate client learning in relation to their personal, social and vocational lives. Based on this “as facet facilitators” (National Guidance Forum, 1997, p.6) adult guidance counsellors need to recognise the many ways in which clients learn about themselves in relation to the world of education and employment.

In this research, I discovered the many possibilities that exist within group learning in relation to career. In particular, findings conclusively indicated how safety and support within adult learner groups can enhance career exploration and development. Adult education plays an important role in this context. As adult guidance counsellors, there is much potential in seeking innovative ways to work more collaboratively with adult educators involved in the delivery of career planning and work experience modules. As mentioned, the governments’ *National Skills Strategy 2020* is concerned with upskilling individuals with the relevant skills required by industry. Adult Education is playing a key role in providing the necessary upskilling courses to address the current skills shortages. There is much synergy in adult guidance practitioners and adult educators working more closely together. This can promote career learning, development and management skills in a broader context upskilling and lifelong learning approaches.

**(2) Adult guidance counsellors engaging in continuous professional development opportunities in relation to ICT**

The need to be up-to-date with what is available in terms of good quality information is essential. Reid (2012, p. 2) talks about how engagement with digital technologies is inescapable and blended with face-to-face is extremely beneficial. She refers to how with such rapid growth in technology how vital it is for practitioners to keep up-to-date. Hooley, Hutchinson and Watts (2010, p. 31) state:

Careers professionals do not have the sole responsibility for all career learning or the development of all online exploration. They do however, have an important role in supporting the development of career-related literacy, in quality-assuring career learning materials and in developing a strong understanding about the inter-relationship between technological development and the pursuit of career.

As outlined in Chapter 3, there is a clear expectation from policy makers that in terms of key competencies; practitioners need to keep abreast of ICT careers resources and information. The provision of continuous professional development in this instance and required resources for accessible training on ICT in adult guidance is key. “The Beyond Activation Conference” highlighted both a lack of time and training as barriers to knowing what is available and the best use of available ICT resources. Whilst competency is a clear requirement, confidence in developing practitioner skill needs to be attended to. Reid (2016, p. 238) states “specific learning or training is required for practitioners to support their digital career literacy”. Hooley (2012, p. 10) refers to how “given that people experience their career as a blend of online and onsite experiences it is highly likely that they will seek, expect and respond to career support that recognises and utilises the potential of this blended environment.” As part of adult guidance counsellors’ academic training and beyond, there needs to be more emphasis on practical examples of best practice in integrating ICT career tools in a blended face-to-face approach into our daily work.

### **(3) More research in ICT careers information in adult guidance practice**

This leads me to from an Irish perspective, I discovered that there is a lack of research into what the integration of ICT into holistic adult guidance practice actually comprises. With this in mind, research is much needed in this context of adult guidance practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Watts (2001, p. 13) refers to how policy makers have often tended to view ICT in guidance practice as either a supplement to existing services or a potential substitute. It is timely that a focused study from Irish professional guidance bodies on how ICT can support a holistic adult guidance relationship is undertaken. To this end, I have included a link to an extensive list of recommended literature in the context of computer-assisted guidance systems (Appendix 13).

#### **(4) Greater consistency and communication across services that support adults with their career development**

The advisory group highlighted the fact that there are many staff working in a guidance role with adults who are not trained guidance professionals. For example: many of the case officers working for the DSP only had up to twenty minutes with each individual. The majority of case officers are not trained guidance professionals. They shared their limitations in terms of time and experience and providing advice on the most appropriate education and/or employment options. So, whether as guidance counsellors we like it or not, the provision of career information, advice and guidance is taking place in many working contexts. I learned through this study that despite the many challenges - it is possible to bring professionals together to try and improve existing working practices.

*MyFuture+* is just one example of an ICT career resource that has the potential to ensure that adults in Ireland can access the most up-to-date careers and educational information in a centralised on-line career file or e-portfolio. I previously mentioned, how in the Irish Government's National Skills Strategy 2025 (2015) the key focus is upskilling individuals to meet the needs of industry. To do this effectively, staff working with the unemployed, career changers and so on need to be trained and equipped themselves with the skills required to provide up-to-date careers information, advice and guidance. Bimrose and Barnes (2010) mention how adult career services should strive to ensure that everyone is able to access the help they need to achieve their goals and ambitions and achieve their full potential. The Irish government should ensure that staff providing career services are effectively trained, confident and possess the necessary qualities to provide this support. Therefore, recognising the importance and funding of adult guidance counselling professional training and development is essential.

## **(5) Adults to have the tools to manage their own careers**

In Chapter 3, I discussed the recognition at policy level, of the importance of lifelong guidance. This refers to a range of activities that enable individuals of any age and at any point in their lives to identify their competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions. Despite the significance placed on facilitating individuals to *manage their own careers*, there is limited career resources to help them to practically do this. As individuals journey through their lives they should have access to their own career information. However, the reality of it is they do not, and their information is very often stored in a fragmented way and resides within the services that have supported them along the way.

I argue that clients should have access to their own career information in their lifelong journey of career. Ethically, their information belongs to them, but current practices mean that clients do not have a mechanism or centralised way in which they can store, access and retrieve their unique career information in the form of an 'e-portfolio' or 'on-line career file'. Hooley (et. al., 2010, p. 25) refers to e-portfolios as tools through which outputs of learning and experience can be kept to aid reflection and communication. The development of *MyFuture+* attempts to address this gap, whereby, the individual provides permission for the staff member to access their career information. This access can be withdrawn at any stage and reactivated with another service at a later stage in the client's life should they wish. From a policy level, resourcing ICT career management tools offers much potential. This includes developing individual's ICT literacy. Hooley (2012, p. 5) argues that "career workers who are not developing digital career literacy will soon find that they are not developing careers at all." It is clear how the concept of digital career literacy intersects with career management skills and this needs attention in the context providing guidance to adults.

The above key points demonstrate my reflexive learning from this study in relation to adult guidance practice. These have wider implications and may inform improvements and further research in this field.

## CONCLUSION

This research has looked at the development of a new ICT career learning tool in collaboration with others. The study examined the potential of the new tool in the context of adult education and guidance practice. Action research is not a straightforward, clean and controlled means of inquiry. I have learned it is often unpredictable and difficult to articulate. It was challenging to contextualise and explain my research topic, particularly given the lack of research related from an Irish perspective. The research journey required me to become more patient and to think in a more critical and reflective way about theorising my practice. Despite the challenges of the process, I learned to value and appreciate my research journey. Most of all, I am grateful for the personal and professional learning I gained. The poem “The Road Less Travelled” by Robert Frost (1920) is reflective of my research journey:

*“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black*

.....  
*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.”*



This study is based on my real-world practice. It has been a practical research process into the development of something new, tangible and living. My reflexive learning on the research journey provides some insights for consideration on improving the integration of ICT within holistic adult guidance practice. Those involved in the research have contributed to and shaped the ICT career learning tool, offering much potential for its future. This research was essentially action research *in action*. The journey continues.....

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1 Brief description of the advisory group members Services in Ireland**

#### **AEGI – Adult Education Guidance Initiative**

The AEGI is a Department of Education and Skills funded initiative which provides a quality educational guidance service for adults. There are currently 39 AEGI Services based nationwide within the Education Training Boards (ETBs) and Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland (WIT). The AEGI helps people to make informed educational career and life choices. Adults can start from where they left off in education and the Guidance Service will support the adult from where he or she is right now. Every adult can access the guidance service for the purposes of up to date impartial adult educational information. Those adults who left school without formal qualifications are also eligible for one-to-one guidance and group guidance. One Adult Guidance Counsellor and one Information Officer became members.

#### **Source:**

AEGI – Adult Education Guidance Initiative. National Centre for Guidance in Education. March 2014. Retrieved on 14/5/2016, from [http://www.ncge.ie/uploads/AEGI\\_Contacts\\_mar2014.pdf](http://www.ncge.ie/uploads/AEGI_Contacts_mar2014.pdf)

#### **DSP- Department of Social Protection**

The mission statement of the Department is to promote active participation in society through the provision of income supports, employment services and other services. The Department supports the Minister for Social Protection in the discharge of governmental, parliamentary and departmental duties.

The main functions are to:

- advise Government and formulate appropriate social protection policies;
- design, develop and deliver effective and cost-efficient income supports,

- activation and employment services, advice to customers and other related services; and
- work towards seamless service delivery in conjunction with other Departments, Agencies and bodies in the delivery of Government policies.

The Department plays a key role in supporting those most in need, including children and their parents, people who are unemployed, ill, care givers, people with disabilities and older people.

Intreo is a new service from the department and a single point of contact for all employment and income supports, designed to provide a more streamlined approach. Intreo offers practical, tailored employment services and supports for jobseekers and employers alike. Four case officers joined the advisory group from the DSP Intreo service.

**Sources:**

Department of Social Protection Mission Statement and Functions. Retrieved on 12/3/2016, from <http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Overview%20of%20the%20Department.aspx#2>

Department of Social Protection Mission Statement and Functions. Accessed on-line 12/3/2016 at: <http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Overview%20of%20the%20Department.aspx#2>

**Youthreach**

Youthreach is a Department of Education and Skills official education, training and work experience programme for early school leavers aged 15 – 20. It offers young people the opportunity to identify options within adult life, and provides them with opportunities to acquire certification. As it operates on a full-time, year-round basis, Youthreach has a continuous intake policy. One adult guidance advocate joined the group and later on, a number of adult educator colleagues.

**Source:**

Youthreach website: accessed on-line 12/3/2016 on-line at: <http://www.youthreach.ie/what-is-youthreach/>

## **LES – Local Employment Services**

The Department of Social Protection (DSP) contracts for the provision of the Local Employment Service (LES) with 22 organisations. The LES provides a local gateway, or access point, to the full range of services and facilities that are available to help jobseekers to enter or return to employment. Services are provided to jobseekers referred to the LES through the Department's activation process and also to clients who engage directly with the service.

The aim of the activation process is to assist unemployed people to identify a personal path to help them re-enter the labour market. A group information session is the most likely form of initial engagement followed by subsequent one to one activation interviews with a *LES Mediator*. Jobseekers are contacted by the Department advising them of the date, time and location where they must attend. One mediator in the location joined the group.

### **Source:**

Department of Social Protection Website. *Local Employment Service*. Retrieved on 22/3/2016, from <http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Local-Employment-Service.aspx>

## **Appendix 2 Information on the study**

**Distributed at 2<sup>nd</sup> Advisory Group Meeting**

**3<sup>rd</sup> November 2015**

Dear Advisory Group Member

I am currently undertaking a MEd in Adult Guidance and Counselling in Maynooth University this academic year 2015-2016. In my research, I aim to examine the process of developing new on-line guidance resources to support adults in their career development.

As an advisory group member your input into shaping these resources is very much valued and important. As a researcher I will be working in critical collaboration with you to develop and pilot the new resources and the study will aim to capture this process. Therefore, this study is an action based research or participatory action research based.

### **About 'Action Based' Research**

Action research is "learning by doing" - a group of people identify a problem, do something to resolve it, see how successful their efforts were, and if not satisfied, try again. While this is the essence of the approach, there are other key attributes of action research that differentiate it from common problem-solving activities that we all engage in every day.

#### **One definition is:**

"Action research...aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to further the goals of social science simultaneously. Thus, there is a dual commitment in action research to study a system and concurrently to collaborate with members of the system in changing it in what is together regarded as a desirable direction. Accomplishing this twin goal requires the active collaboration of researcher and client, and thus it stresses the importance of co-learning as a primary aspect of the research process."

Source: <http://web.net/robrien/papers/arfinal.html>

**Anonymity**

You will not be identifiable within this study and complete anonymity is guaranteed. All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence.

I have provided a consent form seeking your informed consent and agreement to take part in this study.

Thank you.

Bernadette Walsh

[bernadettewalsh11@gmail.com](mailto:bernadettewalsh11@gmail.com)

Phone: 087-6754463

### **Appendix 3 Consent form**

**Research Title:** (Possible)

**The development of innovative ICT career resources to support adult learners and job seekers in the context of their career planning and development.**

I would like to invite you to take part in my research study on the development of new ICT resources to support adult learners and job seekers in their career planning and development. Your input is very important and valued.

I ..... agree to participate in Bernadette Walsh’s research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data prior to the completion of the thesis, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured and I will not be identifiable in the write up of the study.

I understand that disguised extracts from my feedback and input in this inquiry may be quoted and any subsequent publications and I give my permission below.

*If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process please contact the Secretary of the National University of Ireland Maynooth Ethics Committee at [research.ethics@nuim.ie](mailto:research.ethics@nuim.ie). Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.*

**Supervisor:** Dr. David McCormack, Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University. [david.mccormack@nuim.ie](mailto:david.mccormack@nuim.ie)

**Signed:** .....

**Date:** .....

## **Appendix 4 Advisory group member written feedback**

**3<sup>rd</sup> November: Post Training on CareersPortal.ie**

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Had you previously used CareersPortal.ie?</b>   |  |
| <b>If so what resources?</b>   |  |
| <b>What do you feel are the current gaps in the provision of ICT guidance resources in your work?</b>  |  |
| <b>In terms of new developments going forward - What key ICT resources do you feel would be useful in supporting adult learners and jobseekers with their career planning and development?</b> |  |



|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
|                                |  |
| <b>Any additional comments</b> |  |

*Thank you for taking the time to fill in this short questionnaire – your feedback will help develop and shape future CareersPortal adult resources.*

**Note: With your consent, some of this may inform my independent research study.**

**Bernadette Walsh**

## **Appendix 5 Scoping document for the pilot project**

Circulated to advisory group members in December 2015

### **MyFuture+ Project**

Proposed web application for use by clients of services offered under the pilot programme.

#### **Overview**

Clients availing of services from a number of organisations in the \_\_\_\_\_ area will be encouraged to use an online Career Management tool to assist them in progressing/managing their career. The tools available to them will be tailored to their current position on their career path, and will allow them to complete a number of activities (e.g. CV, Interest Inventory), store their research, and undertake some e-learning modules relating to career development.

By completing the online programme, clients build up a personal Career Portfolio. Each client will have the opportunity to share their Portfolio with a local agency (can be more than one), to assist in their development.

Agencies participating in the project will have access to an administration area where they can monitor their client's progress. Portfolios of individual clients who have chosen to share their work will be accessible to agency staff, allowing quick access to client portfolios online.

#### **Client Registration**

We envisage that clients are introduced to the programme via a leaflet issued by agency staff, and that the leaflet provides the instructions for creating an account and using the system. The instructions ask the client to enter the following url into their browser:  
[www.careersportal.ie/myfuture](http://www.careersportal.ie/myfuture) and complete the SignUp process.

The SignUp form is a slight variation of the standard CareersPortal signup, and asks for:

First Name

Family Name

Email

Password

Confirm Password

Service Providers (with Contact Names) [they will tick those appropriate from a list of active agencies]

Service Provider Access Code(s)

Note: New users will be required to register to at least one service from those available. Each service will have the name of their staff shown on a list, so that the user can register to the particular individual dealing with them.

On submitting this form, the client will be taken either directly to their online Career File, or to an additional form to enter their graduation year and class name (for student accounts).

Note: If a user does not partner with any service provider, they will be brought to the standard CareersPortal Career File. There they can complete some of the same exercises, which will be saved on the system. If at a later date they choose to register with a service provider, they will have access to the 'MyFuture' Career File which will automatically be updated to include all of their previous work.

## **MyFuture+ Career File**

The standard CareersPortal Career File is both free and personal to the user. However, users who receive an access code from a service provider will have access to specially tailored 'MyFuture' Career File with additional Apps and features.

The MyFuture Career File will be presented with a streamlined interface with content appropriate to the user. It is envisioned that two versions of this file will be required, one for course providers whose clients are students, the other for service providers whose clients are, for the most part, job seekers.

The exact contents of each file is open to suggestion, but the following are the core tools likely to be required in both cases:

Core Apps:

- Interest Profiler, and resulting occupation matching and report
- Career Sectors App (selects sectors and ranks their importance)
- Personality Profiler, and resulting report
- Career Skills Exercise & Planner
- CV Builder

Core Tools: (these are links to key tools on the CareersPortal site)

- Occupations A-Z
- Career Sector Explorer
- Job Search
- Course Search

In addition, there is:

- My Favourites - a panel that displays any courses / occupations they have bookmarked during their research.
- CareerPad – an online multi-file wordprocessor to store or write anything they want.
- Skills to Succeed Academy – a highly interactive, self-directed, on-line training programme which aims to help people choose the right career, as well as build the key employability skills needed to find and keep a job.

- Career Portfolio – An on-screen and printable summary of information from the Apps and My Favourites.
- Career News – Career news headlines from main CareersPortal website

### **Optional Items:**

There are many additional items that could be added, but keeping it simple may work better. It might be best to have a links panel present with links customised to the relevant service provider. Examples may include:

- WorkXperience Programme
- Diary of Work Experience
- Labour Market Information
- Study Skills Questionnaire

## **Admin Registration**

To access the system, each participating organisation is required to assign staff members to the system. Each staff member will be issued login details by CareersPortal. A dedicated login page will be issued to sign into the programme.

## **Admin Tools**

Two versions of the administration are proposed, one for education providers, where the users are students who are assigned to class groups, and one for services for job seekers, where users are individual clients of a particular staff member.

### **1. Job Seeker Organisations**

The primary purpose of the administration is to allow staff access details of their clients' progress in creating their Career Portfolio.

- **Client Search:** This is a simple search facility to allow staff to find clients based on their name. Clients will be listed along with their assigned staff member. An advanced search may allow filtering by staff member, date entered on the system etc. as required.
- **Client Portfolio:** This is a screen showing the clients' work to date. It would contain the following:
  - Career Sectors chosen, and ranked
  - Career Interests Profiler graph plus summary of top three Interests. A link goes to occupation matching and the printable Career Report
  - Tagged Occupations – a list of occupations bookmarked as being of interest.
  - Career Skills summary graph, plus individual scores for the 26 skills and any comments/actions they may wish to mention
  - Personality Results chart plus link to printable report

In addition, a **special search** will be available that will allow staff to find clients based on information they have entered into their profile, such as their Career Interests and Career Sectors. This would allow staff to search, for example, for people interested in the 'Security, Defence & Law Enforcement' area or 'Clerical & Administration' or 'Realistic' if required. Once clients have been found, they may be tagged and sent an email by the organisation [method to be discussed].

Note: the clients details can, however, only be viewed by their own assigned staff, and not by anyone in the organisation.

## 2. Education Providers

The purpose of the administration is to manage class groups and view individuals' progress over time. This administration is a modified version of the well-established REACH+ programme administration.

- **Setup:** This is required to organize students into classes.
- **View Students:** This area shows all class groups on the system for the organisation and allows each class group to be drilled down into individual students.
  - Class lists show all participants along with their progress on the Apps available.
  - The results from individual Apps can be viewed by clicking on them
  - A Dashboard view provides a single screen view of all top-level data from the available Apps.
- **View Topics:** This area provides some resources associated with Apps available on the system, e.g. videos, powerpoints, documents etc.
- **WorkXperience:** Provides access to the administration of the WorkXperience Programme. This allows organisations to manage most of the paperwork associated with work placements online, and monitor their students' progress.

### Cross – Service features

Clients are at the center of the programme, and their Career Portfolio belongs to them. However, their Career File is portable, and can be shared. If a client is using services from more than one service provider, they may register to a second or even third provider as required (they must be assigned an access code from a staff member in order to do so).

In doing this, the client will have access to the relevant Apps associated with the services registered to. Likewise the client will appear in the client lists of all services registered to.

So, for example, a user who signs up with an adult education service will have access to a MyFuture Career File with the core Apps. If the client then also starts to use the services of an education provider, their Career File will be upgraded to include any additional Apps that are available for that service. The Administration areas of the service providers will not be effected however, such that the Jobseeker Administrators will continue to see the core Apps only, whereas the Education providers will see the student and their progress in the context of their class.

When a client is no longer receiving the services of a service provider, the service provider can 'detach' them from their organisation. The client will automatically lose access to some of the special features of the MyFuture program, though most of their work will remain accessible in their standard CareersPortal Career File.

In a similar way, a client may choose at any time to detach themselves from a service. This will mean they will revert to a standard CareersPortal Career File, and that their data will not be accessible by any organisation.

## **Optional Features**

**Noticeboard:** It may be useful for organisations to manage a noticeboard which can be an integral part of the students Career File. This way organisations can flag upcoming events, job announcements, workshops etc. which will be automatically posted to the clients file when they login.

**Additional Self-Assessments:** Additional self-assessments may be added as they are developed or required.

## **Appendix 6 Parental consent**



# **Parental Consent Form**

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## **MyFuture+ Pilot Programme**

18<sup>th</sup> April 2016

Dear Parent/Guardian

Your child is currently involved in trialling **MyFuture+** in their YouthReach centre.

A career learning tool; the on-line suite of resources aims to assist individuals to explore the world of education, work and employment from an Irish perspective and progress their career development. This new resource encourages a process of self-directed learning which should be particularly beneficial when used in collaboration with a guidance professional.

As part of this pilot project and a study I am undertaking for the NUI Maynooth MEd in Adult Guidance and Counselling, I would like to seek your consent to allow your child to take part in a focus group and to complete a short questionnaire. This will take place during the month of May at a time and date agreed with YouthReach staff. The aim of which is to gather feedback from young people on the pilot so that the new resource can be further developed to respond to the needs of learners and clients using **MyFuture+**.

Some of their feedback may appear in my research study.

Yours sincerely

***Bernadette Walsh***

-----

**I give consent for my child to take part in the May focus group and that his/her feedback may feature in Bernadette Walsh's research study.**

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed by Parent: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 7 Youthreach learner questionnaire

### MyFuture+ Questionnaire: May 2016

This questionnaire aims to capture your initial experience as a **Learner** using the pilot **MyFuture+** over the past number of weeks. It is an opportunity for you to provide honest feedback on your observations and experience so far. All feedback is anonymous. Some of your comments may feature in my research study.

If you are aged 18 years:

I give permission for my comments to feature in Bernadette Walsh's research study

| Please tick the following 'apps' or activities you used in MyFuture+                | YES                      | NO                       |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
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|  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



**What do you think about MyFuture+?**

**Was it easy to use?**

**Did you find it useful that your Tutor/Guidance Counsellor could view your work in this file...**

**What did you like?**

**What did you not like about it?**

**Did you learn anything new about yourself using MyFuture+.....Explain**

**Would you like to use this as part of your class in the future...Explain**

**What changes would you like to see happen?**

**What else would you like to see added to MyFuture+**

**Did MyFuture+ help you think about planning your career...**

**Do you think MyFuture+ is/will be useful to your one to one career guidance session....Discuss**

## **Appendix 8 Focus group questions**

20-30 minutes group discussion

- 1.** What do you think of *MyFuture+*?
  
- 2.** Did you learn anything new about yourself?
  
- 3.** What did you not like/want changed about *MyFuture+*?
  
- 4.** Would you like to continue to use it after the pilot?

## **Appendix 9 Adult guidance questionnaire**

### **MyFuture+ Questionnaire**

**May 2016**

This questionnaire aims to capture your initial experience as an **Adult Guidance Practitioner** using the pilot **MyFuture+** on-line career resources with your clients over the past number of weeks. It is an opportunity for you to provide preliminary feedback on your observations and experience so far. All feedback is anonymous and your honest reflections are very welcome. Some of your comments may feature in my research study.

I give permission for my comments to feature in Bernadette Walsh's research study

**What is your role working with MyFuture+**

**How would you describe MyFuture+ as an Adult Guidance practitioner?**

**Has MyFuture+ been useful to your role....Explain**

**How do you feel your clients have responded to the new resource**

**Has there been any difficulties with navigation, use etc.**

**What current changes would you recommend....why?**

**How do you feel MyFuture+ integrated into your practice as an Adult Guidance counsellor?**

**Is this a resource you would like to continue to use in your practice....Explain**

**What has your experience of being part of the pilot?**

**Any further comments**

## **Appendix 10 Adult educator questionnaire**

### **MyFuture+ Questionnaire**

**May 2016**

This questionnaire aims to capture your initial experience as an **Adult Educator** using the pilot **MyFuture+** on-line career resources with your participants over the past number of weeks. It is an opportunity for you to provide preliminary feedback on your observations and experience so far. All feedback is anonymous and your honest reflections are very welcome. Some of your comments may feature in my research study.

I give permission for my comments to feature in Bernadette Walsh's research study

**What is your role working with MyFuture+**

**How would you describe MyFuture+ as an Adult Educator?**

**Has MyFuture+ been useful to your role....Explain**

**How do you feel your learners have responded to the new resource**

**Has there been any difficulties with navigation etc.**

|  |
|--|
|  |
| <b>What current changes would you recommend....</b>                              |
| <b>Is this a resource you would like to continue use in your role....Explain</b> |
| <b>Has MyFuture+ impact on your participants learning in any new way</b>         |
| <b>What has your experience of being part of the pilot?</b>                      |
| <b>Any further comments</b>  |

**Appendix 11 'Beyond activation conference': workshop**

**Questionnaire: 16<sup>th</sup> April 2016**

**I give permission for my comments to be used for research purposes**

1. How **confident** are you using ICT in your practice?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (please circle on a scale of 1-10)

**Reflection:**

2. How would you rate **the importance** of ICT in the adult guidance process?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (please circle on a scale of 1-10)

**Reflection:**



3. What (if any) do you feel the **current gaps** are in the provision of effective ICT adult guidance resources?

**Reflection:**

4. Do you believe that ICT can be **integrated in a holistic way** within the adult guidance relationship?

**Reflection:**

***This is an anonymous questionnaire. Some comments may feature in my research piece. Please Note: There is no obligation for you to take part.***

## **Appendix 12 MyFuture+ career interest profiler**

### **CPIP – CareersPortal Interest Profiler**

The CareersPortal Interest Profiler was developed by CareersPortal and has been in operation since 2008. It is a development of a previous instrument – the *CareersWorld Preference Test* developed in 1999. In its current form, it has been used by over 300,000 users since it was made available in 2008.

The full profiler consists of:

- a self-assessment instrument
- a short one-page printable summary report
- a longer 7+ page printable report with interpretation and career matching
- a printable HE Course matching report
- an online career matching option
- an online HE Courses matching
- an online FE Courses matching

### **Versions**

There are two slightly different versions of the instrument, one tailored to youths and the other to adults. The youth version is also available through Irish, including all of the reports.

The difference between the instruments include the language used for the question items, the nature of some of the items themselves, and the scoring scheme.

The version of the instrument presented to the user is based on the ‘community’ they register to when they sign up. Those who register to the School community will be presented with the youth version, all others will receive the Adult version.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Interest Profiler is based on the theory of career interests by John Holland (USA). It uses 4 of Hollands 6 career interests, and sub-divides two others, Artistic and Realist to make 8 categories. The following table shows the relationship between the two models:

| <b>Holland</b> | <b>CPIP</b>    |
|----------------|----------------|
| Realist        | Realist        |
|                | Naturalist     |
| Investigative  | Investigative  |
| Artistic       | Creative       |
|                | Linguistic     |
| Social         | Social         |
| Enterprising   | Enterprising   |
| Conventional   | Administrative |

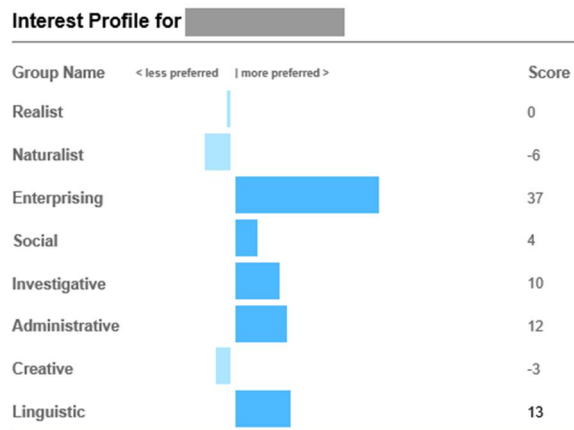
The subdivisions of Realist and Artistic allow greater distinctions to be made in areas felt to be particularly important in Ireland. Holland's Realistic is divided according to whether the interest is in working with animate or inanimate objects – if they like working with living things (animals, plants, the living environment, or their produce) the CPIP identifies this as being Naturalist. If they like working with inanimate things (buildings, machines etc.) the CPIP identifies this as being Realistic. In both cases, the individuals are practical and mechanically minded, but the object of their interest is quite different.

Holland's Artistic is divided to separate out the linguistic components, such as creative writing, interest in language in itself, and using language, speech and writing as a form of expression. This is identified as being Linguistic, the remaining elements of Holland's Artistic are identified as being Creative. In both cases, there is an avoidance of highly ordered or repetitive activities as they see themselves as expressive, original and independent.

## **Interpretation**

The instrument uses a specially designed selection device to collect information from the 56 paired statements of the questionnaire. As the test was designed as a tool to help individuals identify their top interests, the device allows the user to clearly indicate where their interests lie. The scoring reflects these choices by exaggerating the results where preferences are indicated. The resulting profile shows the relative levels of interest in the 8 interest categories measured.

## Sample Profile:



The graph above displays your interests profile. It shows both high and low interest categories. For the purposes of your career exploration, you need to concentrate on the highest scores.

Note: Where scores are close (a few points different) you may consider them as equal - no exercise of this type is that precise!

It is important to note that instrument was not designed to identify any 'norms' in the population, or to measure any characteristics that could be used to compare individuals. It is solely designed to identify the relative 'strength' of interests for an individual. It is therefore not a psychometric instrument, and does not claim to measure any supposed 'real' attributes (Holland's Interest categories are useful, but not 'real' in the normal sense of the word).

This means that the numeric scores have no 'absolute' meaning whatsoever – if one person's highest score is 60 for Realist, and another's is 10 for Realist, they both have Realist as their first preference. In no way does the instrument claim to measure the first person's interest as being stronger or better developed or in any other measure greater than the person who scores 10. It is the relative score only that matters. Comparing scores with others is therefore quite futile!

Some profiles will also show a minus score and the graph will indicate that these interests are less preferred. This is normal for this instrument and is intended to reflect what the participant often knows well already – that they have very little, or an active disinterest in those areas (minus scores tend to indicate an active disinterest – which is useful information for career guidance purposes). Again, it in no way indicates lack of knowledge or competency – simply that that is not where their interests lie, or areas where little long term career satisfaction is likely.

## Career Matching

The CPIP is linked to the National Occupational database on CareersPortal, and uses the three top interest codes to match occupations. All occupations in the database are coded with up to three CPIP codes as per the O\*net occupational data published in the US. The additional codes used by the CPIP are translated to the CPIP classification for the additional two categories used as appropriate. The O\*net data is empirically derived and updated regularly. Occupations not present in the O\*net are coded based on published occupational data according to the theoretical constructs used to inform the CPIP.

Matching is completed by searching through multiple combinations of codes to get the best matches. The results are sorted into three different levels of matching – level 1 being the closest, level 2 next best, and level 3 showing occupations with at least one code in a prominent position. The codes associated with each occupation are shown so that there is no mystery to the process, and the reason why they are matched are clear to anyone who is interested.

Users of the CPIP can additionally filter the matched results according to up to 4 career sectors, and five Job Zones (levels of educational/experience – using O\*net definitions).

In cases where the profile shows interest categories that are very similar, it is advised to alter the order of the interests to generate alternative lists of matching occupations. This allows a very flexible method of using the results to fine tune a report or list for research.

## **Course Matching**

CareersPortal maintain an independent database of HE (CAO) and FE (PLC) courses for undergraduates. All courses are coded according to the CPIP interest categories, such that course matching is possible. Unlike the occupational database, there is no empirically derived method of assigning codes to courses, and as result the matching does not attempt to order the results according to closeness of match. Each course is assigned codes according to either the occupation group that is the most natural follow on for the course, or according to the type of learning environment / course content.

The matching that results presents a list of courses that match any three of the CPIP results with any three codes associated with the courses. As this often generates long lists of courses (we do not want to exclude courses that may be of interest) the CPIP provides additional filters to focus the results. Users can select up to four study areas (corresponding to career sectors), QQI levels, LC subject requirements, and region (or College). The resulting list is ranked by course title (a-z).

For further information on the CPIP, contact [jcarton@careersportal.ie](mailto:jcarton@careersportal.ie)

## **Appendix 13 Computer-assisted career guidance bibliography**

### **Suggestions for Further Reading**

By: James P. Sampson, Jr., Robert C. Reardon, Jonathan D. Shy.

Copyright 2003 by Florida State University. Permission is granted to copy, disseminate, or otherwise reproduce this document provided appropriate credit is given.

This bibliography is intended to assist practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and system developers in identifying and locating sources of information on the design and use of computer-assisted career guidance (CACG) systems. The ultimate aim of this effort is to improve the availability of quality assessments and information that are delivered to children, adolescents, and adults.

This bibliography contains citations that address a variety of topics such as the role of the computer and the practitioner in providing career planning services, ethical issues, practitioner intervention strategies, quality of computer-based assessment information, the implementation process, research and evaluation issues, counselor training, and comparative descriptions of two or more systems. In general, documents describing a single CACG system have not been included in this bibliography. Additional information on the above topics may be obtained from the Association of Computer-Based Systems for Career Information, 10820 East 45 Street, Suite 210, Tulsa, Oklahoma 74146 (866) 367-6232) <http://www.acsci.org>

It is a **28 page document**: Sourced 20<sup>th</sup> May 2016

To this end the following is a link to download this detailed word document:

**[www.career.fsu.edu/content/download/191825/1658964/CACG](http://www.career.fsu.edu/content/download/191825/1658964/CACG)**