An Exploration of the Level of Usage of the Career Guidance Service by Students in Third Level Education in Ireland

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Declaration

The author hereby declares that this thesis is entirely his own work. No element of the work described in this dissertation has been previously submitted for any degree in University of Limerick, or in any other institution.

Signature____________________
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Glossary of Terms

AHEAD: Association for Higher Education Access and Disability
CPD: Continuous Professional Development
CTC: Chaos Theory of Careers
DES: Department of Education and Skills
ELGPN: European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network
EU: European Union
HEA: Higher Education Authority
HE: Higher Education
HEI: Higher Education Institutions
IGC: Irish Guidance Counsellor
NGF: National Guidance Forum
OECD: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SCCT: Social Cognitive Career Theory
Abstract

The overall purpose of this research study is to investigate the perceptions of career advisors working in Higher Education (HE) career guidance services in Ireland. The study specifically focuses on the level of usage of the career services by students in third level education.

According to Lairio and Penttine (2006) as the HE sector expands, essential services provided by the career guidance service have a pivotal role to play, safeguarding the tertiary provision which is grounded in and receptive to the ever evolving needs of individual students. In terms of guidance, the National Guidance Forum (2007) identified weaknesses in the career guidance service at HE with regards to policy and practice, describing it as disjointed, fragmented and stressing need for a greater integrated system. There is a lack of empirical research from the point of view of career guidance advisors on the provision of third level career (European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network 2015). The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2011) also fails to acknowledge the career guidance service on a national scale. This study therefore aims to gain an insight into a service that is vital for the student population across the HE sector.

An interpretive paradigm was employed using semi structured interviews to ensure the collection of the experiences of a sample of career advisors employed in career services at HE in both Institutes of Technology and Universities. The data technique involved was identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within the collected data were undertaken through a thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

Given the current influx of individuals attending third level education across Ireland, the findings are that HE career guidance services are under constant pressure to meet the demands of an expanding and diverse student population. Due to this demand there is a need now, more than ever, for extra funding and resources, both have equated to an increase in accountability of the career service across the third level sector. In addition, the study highlights how the HE career service has had to change its methods of delivery to bring it outside the four walls of the careers office by employing more non-traditional approaches such as teaching in-class career modules, engaging in a range of social media routes, and linking more with employers. A number of recommendations are put forward to inform policy, practice and research arising from the study.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This research seeks to investigate the level of usage of the career service by students in third level education in Ireland. The chapter discusses the context and justification for the research study, position of the researcher, aim and objectives of the study, research methodology and the outline of the thesis.

1.1 Context and Justification for the Research Study

The inception of this study arose from the recognised growth and popularity of third level education across the HE sector in recent times. According to the Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2016) the number of full-time students in third level education is now exceeding 170,000. A formal career service was first developed in the Irish third level sector in 1902 (NGF, 2007). The HE career services have evolved since their initiation and have adapted accordingly, following the needs of society and institution, economic factors, demands and trends of the labour market (Dey and Cruzvergara 2014).

The Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 outlines the ambition of the Government to become a leader in innovation by improving career guidance and the promotion of lifelong learning (DES 2016). Furthermore, the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) (2014) acknowledges that lifelong guidance should involve working people and employers, while also providing active experiences of workplaces for individuals. This correlates with Raschauer and Resch’s (2016) research that employment policy is now tied to the education system. As the HEA seeks directional reform, accountability of the career services has become a priority. According to Dey and Cruzvergara (2014) greater accountability and visibility is the focus at third level, the value of career services have been recognized by institutions who have started to increase the amount of resources, staff, funds, support programs, grants, initiatives and support that is prominently located on campus.

A constructive perspective supports strategies and career theory for career guidance which can ensure individuals can cope with challenges in today’s labour market (Savickas, 2012). Additionally, he implores guidance counsellors to try new methods for helping clients in such situations. The engagement in qualitative research can assist and deepen one’s understanding (Kidd, 2006). This research study focuses on career advisors who work with students in the HE sector. As the student population is continuing to increase, the researcher has a concern
about the availability of the career service to the entire student cohort. Within this context, the researcher wishes to focus on current practice in a number of career services and to give a voice to HE career advisors who appear to be under-represented in guidance research.

The focus of this research is to provide an insight into the current delivery methods used by HE career services to connect with the student population. The research will focus on examining the use of traditional methods (email, telephone, walk-ins, posters, presentations, newsletters, career stands) along with non-traditional methods (teaching and social media platforms). Flexibility can increase the service delivery within the institutions network (Charles and Jackson, 2010) and the use of social media is seen as a priority for HE career services due to its speed, cost and accessibility (Kettunen et al., 2015). The research findings may highlight disparities or similarities across the HE sector.

1.2 Position of the Researcher

According to Thomas (2013) the positionality of the researcher in interpretivist research is extremely important. Furthermore, the researcher must acknowledge his own assumptions and position on the research area, as well as the role in which the researcher now works (Cohen et al., 2007). During this study, the researcher was employed as a teacher by the DES within the post-primary sector and has taught Business Studies, Economics, Geography, and Maths to both junior and senior students. The researcher is also a trainee guidance counsellor. The research topic appealed as it is a very important issue for a guidance counsellor who is entering the guidance profession.

The idea for this research stemmed from my experience of being a student in a number of different third level institutions over a nine year period. The researcher was interested in investigating the provision of the career service at a number of different HE settings, while also examining the usage of the career service by the student demographic. Each HE career service provided a unique service to the students of the specific third level provider. Throughout the study, as part of the reflexivity process the researcher kept a journal which included details of interactions, opinions and responses from not only participants but the supervisor throughout the study.

1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of the research is to investigate the level of usage of the career service by students in third level education in Ireland.
Furthermore the objectives of the research are:

1. To explore the literature in relation to policy, theory and practice of career guidance in the HE sector.
2. To gain an insight into the role of the 21st century career advisor at third level
3. To advance understand of the qualifications and CPD that career advisors hold in their position
4. To identify the impression of career advisors to the change in provision of the career service at third level.
5. To discover the individual approach of the career service in the different institutions.
6. To review the most suitable means for the career service to connect with the student population
7. To make a number of recommendations to inform policy, practice and research.

1.4 Research Methodology

This research study is underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm as capturing individual’s perceptions, feelings and experiences relating to career service at third level was essential. To ensure the attainment of the appropriate data, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with career advisors relating to their work within different HE career services (Thomas, 2013). After the interviews were transcribed a thematic analysis strategy was used to produce the primary research findings (Cohen et al., 2011). Critical issues such as ethics, reliability, validity and reflexivity were considered throughout the research process.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

The structure of the dissertation is as follows:

Chapter one provides an overview and justification to the study within the parameters of policy, theory and practice. The positionality of the researcher is outlined. The methodology, aim and objectives of the study are described. It also provides an outline of the thesis.

Chapter two presents a critical examination of the literature. It commences with an introduction, followed by policies and practice in the area of career guidance. The themes of
Career development and decision making are addressed and followed by career guidance in HE.

Chapter three illuminates the research questions as the foundation of the research. The rationale for the research approach is outlined, while the techniques of data collection and analyses are also established.

Chapter four presents the data analysis strategy and the primary research findings.

Chapter five discusses the overall findings of the study through a critical interpretation and linking of the primary data findings with the literature from the earlier review. Key themes are identified.

In chapter six, the research study is concluded with a summary of the main findings within the context of the aim and objectives and implications for policy and practice. The strengths and limitations of the research are also outlined; recommendations are put forward and a reflexive discussion in relation to personal learning is provided.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

Across the globe as the system of HE expands, essential services provided by the career guidance department have an extremely pivotal role to play, safeguarding the expansion of tertiary provision which is grounded in and receptive to the ever evolving needs of individual students (Lairio and Penttine, 2006). The literature on the area of career guidance services at Higher Education is vast. Therefore, this review has focused on the area of the usage of the career service by students and the role of the career advisor within this service. The first section discusses international and national policy with regards to career guidance, before clear definitions of career guidance are outlined. Additionally, considerations of the key perspectives on careers and the theories of guidance counselling that currently outlines the delivery of a quality service in the HE system are highlighted. Finally career development and decision-making of individuals, Higher Education Policy, and career guidance in HE Institutes are addressed.

2.1 Policy Perspectives on Career Guidance

This section focuses on the area of international and national policy relevant to career guidance in HE. Additionally, it reflects the key developments within policy reform that currently influence the delivery of a quality service in the HE system.

2.1.1 International and National Career Guidance Policy

European policy with regards to career guidance across the European Union (EU) began in the 1960s, when the European Social Charter recognised the right to vocational guidance (Council of Europe, 1996). According to the European Parliament (2017) in 1992, the Single European Market with an application on the management of mobility of trainees, students, and workers throughout Europe, paid close attention to cross-sectional and transnational career-guidance networking. The Council Resolution’s main aim by 2004 was “strengthening policies, systems and practices in the field of guidance throughout life in Europe” (Council of the European Union 2004, p.1), and since 2008 its aim strategically has been to “better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies” (Council of the European Union, 2008 p.1).
In recent years guidance has been at the forefront of European Lifelong Learning Policies (Commission of the European Communities 2007). From a social and economic perspective, Europe wanted the most competitive knowledge based economy by 2020 (Raschauer and Resch 2016). Binding guidance and employment policy within the education system has ensured a change in direction in EU policy and training, basically a renewed interest in the role of career guidance to support lifelong learning (Raschauer and Resch’s, 2016). The focus in recent years, according to Plant (2012), is the link to value for money policies and the quality of the service, which have underlining cost benefit issues and links to the immediate usefulness of the provision of guidance. With regards to the establishment of high-quality university career guidance services, a gap appears to exist between the current reality of guidance and the priorities outlined by policy-makers (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2009).

According to Watts el al., (2010) vocational guidance is recognized as fundamental to enhancing employment opportunities for individuals. Vocational guidance was intended to be ‘available free of charge, both to young persons, including schoolchildren, and to adults’ (Watts et al., 2010 p.89). A centre for education means a place, where adult, continuing education or vocational education is provided (Irish Education Act 1998). However, “lifelong guidance” has now replaced “vocational guidance” as the focus of EU policy (Sultana, 2004). Sultana (2014) highlights the need for vocational and educational guidance to be more distinct as lines have become blurred and guidance throughout life is now the new focus due to external factors such as labour markets, training, education and work, which all have become less linear in knowledge based societies and the needs of citizens throughout their lifespan are now managing education, training and occupational pathways.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in the early part of the twenty-first century recognised the changing working environments and aims for career guidance and career education across the EU, including Ireland (OECD, 2004). From an Irish perspective the DES (2000, p.19) Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education recognised guidance as one of the “fundamental foundation blocks which must be put in place in building a comprehensive system of Adult Education within an overall framework of lifelong learning”. However, the OECD (2004) reported that the quality and provision of guidance counselling in Ireland needs to adopt a wider range of delivery methods. In terms of lifelong guidance, (NGF, 2007) OCED recognised weaknesses in linking policy and practice
with regards to the career guidance service, describing the service as disjointed, fragmented and stressing need for a greater integrated system across the lifespan for citizens.

It has been argued that the DES employs a positive approach that requires measurement of progression requiring hard outcomes and performance indicators based solely on education and employment readiness (Hearne, 2010). Watts et al., (2014) stated that there is a need to develop more sophisticated methodologies to try to quantify the full impact of career guidance interventions and to identify what the ‘value added’ contribution is. The DES Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 shapes the ambition of the Government to become a leader in innovation within Europe (DES 2016). This can match the top performers on the contention by developing stronger entrepreneurship in education, improved career guidance and the promotion of lifelong learning, all of which are essential to ensure students make well informed choices (DES 2016).

As the focus has now shifted to lifelong learning and lifelong guidance, the emphasis on guidance counselling policy and professional practice need to be, according to Volmari et al., (2009), flexible and adaptive due to the ever changing social, economic, and globalised reality of the working world. Due to the unpredictable careers reality, individuals must also be resilient and flexible with an appreciation of the role of lifelong learning in career progression (ELGPN, 2012). However, Edwards et al., (2013) argued that defining career guidance is important to gain an insight into the alignment between policy and practice.

2.1.2 Defining Career Guidance

To gain an understanding of career guidance, defining the concepts related to it are important, such as, ‘career’ and ‘guidance’. Arnold (1997, p.43) defines a ‘career’ as “a sequence of employment-related positions, roles, activities, and experiences encountered by a person”, which include study leave, unemployment phases, sabbaticals, and phases when individuals seek employment. While Watts et al., (1996) outlined that a career consists of a series of renegotiations of roles within an organisation and their associated training requirements. Savickas (2005) furthers this point by stating that careers do not unfold, they are constructed as one makes choices that express their self-concepts and substantiates their goals in the social reality of life. The definition by Arnold (1997) may imply that aspects of one’s career are subjective, in that they may be understood best by individual specific experiences, whilst other aspects are more objective, and may be defined and observed publicly. With this in mind, Inkson et al., (2012) outline that the ongoing relationship between people and their
work are nicely captured by the notion of a career, which uniquely connects individuals with organisations and other social institutions over time. Whilst Watts et al. (1996) and Savickas’s (2005) definitions highlight that the career experience over a lifetime may reflect the changing values, needs, attitudes, and aspirations of an individual towards work. Furthermore, a career emerges from the interaction between individual experience and agency, and the enabling and constraining forces of the social context on the other (Kidd 2006). Crow and Crow (1960) maintained that ‘guidance’ is assistance provided by a counsellor to an individual to help give direction, make their own decisions, develop their point of view, and carry their own burdens. Shertzer and Stone (1976) define guidance as the process of helping individuals to understand their world and themselves; and involve a series of actions or steps progressing towards a goal. Watts and Kidd (2000, p.489) broadly define guidance as a “range of processes designed to enable individuals to make informed choices and transitions related to educational, vocational and personal development”.

From an Irish perspective the NGF (2007) definition of guidance refers to enabling people throughout their lifespan to manage their own life, social, personal, occupational, training, and educational choices to allow them to reach their full potential and contribute to the development of a better society. Similar to the definitions above, Kinra (2008) states that guidance is the focus of abilities and strengths of individuals to independently solve problems and assist them to unravel their potential, interest and abilities, consequentiality enabling them to solve their own problems. According to Barnes et al., (2010), the term guidance implies that someone is leading or guiding and another is being guided. The collective definitions of guidance would indicate the notion of a knowledgeable expert, who is present so that people can gain an understanding of one self, grow, prosper, and cope with the ever changing life that we live in. However, the problem with the definition is that we find references to persons performing guidance duties in different countries with different terms; guidance teachers, career path counsellors, study counsellors, career offices, and guidance counsellors (Sultana, 2004). According to Sultana (2004), as guidance is a multidimensional activity established in different contexts with various meanings to different practitioners, in some literature, the terms career counselling, career guidance, vocational education are used interchangeably.
2.1.3 Theories of Guidance Counselling

As with the definition of guidance, career guidance counselling is defined in various ways across different continents. However, according to Athanasou and Esbroeck (2008) the term implies assisting individuals to manage vocational and educational life paths through a set of interrelated activities. As the working world has evolved, more and more people make changes in their career direction throughout the life course, while learning new skills and aptitudes in order to do so, thus work and learning are intertwined, on a lifelong basis (Athansou and Esbroeck, 2008). Watts (2013) outlines that a distinction has been made in the past between ‘educational guidance’, concerned with course choices, and ‘vocational guidance’, concerned with occupational choices.

Research would suggest that careers advisors, educational guidance workers, and higher education careers advisors can vary considerably in their familiarity with different models of guidance counselling interviewing (Kidd et al., 1993). The person-centred approach of Rogers (1942) argues that the role of the guidance counsellor is structured in their attitudes and way of being, not in a method, skills or techniques intended to get the client to do something (Kidd, 2006). The approach and the facilitation of change within a client will be dependent on the attitude of guidance counsellors, rather than their theories, techniques or knowledge (Rogers, 1961). The therapist is the key to unlocking change through specific attitudes and qualities such as congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding (Corey, 2013). Culley and Bond (2011) stress that an effective person-centred therapist must be focused, present, genuine, respectful, caring, grounded, and acceptant, without this application mere skill is likely to be hollow.

Egan (2008) signifies that guidance counselling has an emphasis on the skilled helper which is a model for designing and facilitating change, rather than what units of knowledge that a counsellor may have. The guidance counsellor will take a problem management approach based on Egan’s three stage model (identifying the problem, developing a preferred scenario, and formulating plans) in order to help a client explore their main concerns, goal setting and action planning (Kidd, 2006 p.71). The counsellor can approach this by engaging in active listening (Rogers and Farson, 1987) and the use of “probing questions” (Hough, 1998 p.48), as probes can be used to help clients explore different goals as well as original concerns (Egan, 1998). Egan (1998) emphasises the importance of the ‘client-helper contract’, which
enables both parties to understand what their responsibilities are and help them to develop realistic mutual expectations.

With the above theories in mind, Kidd (2006) argues that tools of assessment should facilitate the client’s self-understanding, which steps away from the traditional person-environment fit approach of providing information for the career counsellor’s evaluation of the client. Vocational choice has been challenged on a number of different grounds. Watts and Fretwell (2004) debated that:

- The process of matching should address an individual’s interests, values, needs, and not just their aptitudes and abilities.
- The concern for career guidance should include self-development, growth, along with matching existing attributes.
- The underlining philosophy of career guidance is to help people make decisions for themselves, rather than allowing an expert to make decisions for people.
- Movement away from discrete decisions at particular timeframes to a continuous process of career development through which individuals determine the course of their lives.

Consequently, a shift has been made towards a new model; this new approach can be seen in the work of Ali and Graham (1996). Ali and Graham (1996) stated that the process of effective career guidance aims to equip individuals with a clear appreciation of themselves and their potential for future career development. In particular they highlight the fact that career guidance helps individuals to:

- ‘Assess their career development needs at various points in their lives’
- ‘Understand the process of effective choice of a career’
- ‘Clarify their objectives for the future’
- ‘Take appropriate action to implement these objectives’ (Ali and Graham 1996 p.2)

Another theoretical perspective that has emerged in recent years is the more narrative rather than psychological approach, with a primary focus on helping individuals to develop their skills within the realisms of career management and from testing to tasting (Stebleton 2010). The guidance counselling experience may have a more empowering effect on the client due
to the narrative perspective assuming a collaborative and co-creative process (Campbell and Ugar, 2004). As the client is asked to re-write a career story, the process is seen as proactive and results in new possibilities in the future (Redi, 2005). Personal agency in the career construction process is emphasized (Niles and Hartung 2000), with the counsellor a facilitator as the helping relationship tends to be a team effort (McMahon and Patton, 2006b).

Savickas (2005) outlines the main emphasis in narrative-based career counselling approaches is the evolving meaning of experiences as opposed to more static traits. Savickas (2012) proposes that to assist clients in the 21st century, counsellor’s now need to concentrate on identity rather than personality, adaptability rather than maturity, intentionality rather than decidedness, and stories rather than scores. This concentration on key constructs underpins a new model of career construction theory through realising vocational behaviour (Savickas 2005). According to Severy (2008), this allows for creativity within the counselling process. Moreover, clients are able to articulate and share their stories, and voice their experiences with others (Reid, 2006). The narrative based approach does have some limitations, for example Stebleton (2010) argues that it may present incongruent expectations of the helping role between the guidance counsellor and the client. Due to the lack of structured techniques and outcomes for narrative based approaches less experienced counsellors may be overwhelmed (Thomas and Gibbons, 2009). Counsellors with more experience might be less willing to learn new approaches and may rely on traditional methods that tend to be more directive and predictable (Bujold, 2004).

2.2 Theories of Career Development and Decision-Making

This section will address the latest figures from the HEA (2015) highlight the wide range of age groupings of students now attending third level education in Ireland. According to the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education (2015), with such a range of age groupings, the needs of students at different life stages must be met. Therefore, due to this range of ages, the career development and decision-making of individuals needs to be understood to gain an insight into the challenges faced by each individual student.

Theories of career development and decision making have evolved since early part of the 20th century ranging from differential, developmental, social learning and constructivist (Patton and McMahon, 2014). Parsons (1909, p.5) proposed that when we speak of vocational, there are a number of factors; “a clear understanding of yourself, a knowledge of the requirements and prospects lines of work, and true reasoning of these two groups of facts”. His method
which was based on measurement through testing of interests and aptitudes of an individual was known as the ‘test and tell’ approach. This differential approach has been the dominant approach underpinning career guidance practice (Watts, 2013).

This concept of person-environment fit, further developed by John Holland (1997), focuses was on individual characteristics; differences that differentiated individuals from one another (Pryor and Bright, 2011). Holland proposed that individuals will seek out a career or careers that are congruent with their environments and interests (Herr et al., 2004). The key principle is that the “fit between a worker and a job has provided a framework for comprehending vocational behaviour” (Savickas, 2005, p.145). The theory’s main concept is uncomplicated, and the vast array of assessment instruments derived from it have been produced to assist practitioners (Patton and McMahon, 2014). However, Inkson et al., (2015) argue that Holland’s model oversimplifies the fit, as it does not pay enough attention to reciprocal influences between individuals and work environments and it does not take enough account of the fit between abilities and the demand of work.

The traditional view of careers was based on the conception to progress in a linear stage (Schmid, 2004). However others, such as Daniel Levinson’s evolving life structure theory developed in the 1970s begins at a stage in mid-life (Kidd, 2006). Levinson coined the theory BOOM – ‘becoming one’s own man’ and described this stage as one in which “greater indviduation allows him to be more separate from the world, to be more independent and self-generating” (Ali and Graham, 1996 p. 38). Levinson’s theory of mid-career is in essence about maintaining one’s existing position, while also significantly outlining what is going on within the person may make them more resilient to the career environment changes (Herr et al. 2004). According to Inkson et al., (2007) a significant event like returning to education due to redundancy can make it more difficult to achieve personal goals, but Levinson’s theory is invalidated only if it can be shown that such events fundamentally change the rhythm of people’s lives.

Similar to the developmental theory of Levinson, Donald Super (1990) used an image of a rainbow to describe the ‘life space’ of an individual and the various roles within it (Patton and McMahon, 2014). According to Ali and Graham (1996) the rainbow bands signify the different roles a person assumes during the life course, and breaks in the band highlight where the individual ceases to play the role, as in the case of a parent returning to education. The career development aspects drawn by Super (1990, p.199) were “taken from
developmental, differential, social, personality, and phenomenological psychology and held together by self-concept and learning theory”. According to Sharf (2010) Super’s beliefs stated that vocational self-concept is within life stage development and that occupational choice is an attempt to implement one’s self-concept. However, a limitation of Super’s theory is that it pays little attention to the psychological processes involved in changing jobs and adapting to work environments (Sharf, 2010). Social arrangement as a concept is a pivotal determinant of career-related life is a pillar of opportunity-structure theories (Sharf, 2010).

Conversely, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) outlines the developmental interests, career, and educational choices, and determination in work and education (Lent and Brown, 2012). The proposition here is that self-efficacy outcomes and belief expectations both envisage academic and occupational interests (Perdrix et al., 2012). The sources of self-efficacy in career counselling can be used to inform the design of career interventions (Lent et al., 1996; Sharf, 2010). Self-efficacy sources according to Bandura (1997) are support and encouragement from others, low anxiety levels, vicarious modelling, and performance accomplishments. Furthermore, Kidd (2006) outlines that interest’s lead to career-related goals, which in turn influences how career-related activities are selected and practised. SCCT allows us to see the range of sources of influence and help that individuals are in contact with and highlights the co-ordination role which practitioners may have with either already influence individuals or can potentially contribute to the decision making process (Reid, 2016).

In more recent times, constructivism has gained considerable footing in theories of career development. According to Herr et al., (2004) a constructivist approach focuses on the importance of individuals gaining understanding of the context in which their careers develop. The theory of constructivism proposes that we find connections, structures in any stimuli and untimely we are pattern makers (Kidd, 2006). Constructivist counselling allows individuals to give meaning to their lives and difficult events can be described with the use of a metaphor (Sharf, 2010).

The Chaos Theory of Careers (CTC) characterises individuals as a complex system and subject to the influence of chance events and complex influences (Peake and McDowall, 2012). Over a period of time Patton and McMahon (2014) argue that patterns emerge in our behaviour which is self-similar but also subject to change. Non-linear change is a factor in our careers and at times it is the small steps that have profound outcomes, while sometimes
changing everything changes nothing (Patton and McMahon, 2014). Due to the unpredictability of our careers, individuals either express a degree of disappointment or delight at their final location. Career change is a continuum sometimes a slow shift resulting in slightly drifting off course, sometimes a more dramatic movement with significant career change (Bright, 2015). With these fluctuating and complex patterns we search for understanding while also construct meaning from our experiences of these constructions and patterns (Pryor and Bright, 2011).

Hearne (2010, p.44) argues that approaches such as constructivism enable individual clients to pass through the changing nature of social structures, employment and education on an ongoing basis in the future. It is clear from the literature that a constructivist approach is a means that not only supports self-management and personal meaning, but is also a process that supports transitions across the lifespan. As specified in the above literature, career guidance and career counselling are used at times interchangeable.

2.3 Career Guidance in Higher Education

In this section the relevant literature in relation to the policies and the role of career guidance within the Higher Education sector will be discussed. The HEA (2012) suggest that guidance is an integral and comprehensive element of the Higher Education experience, and this has implications for guidance counsellors. This is explicated in the following section.

2.3.1 Higher Education Policy

According to the NGF (2007) HE has a pivotal role to play in the provision of a lifelong guidance service in Ireland. According to the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (HEA 2011) report, improving and enhancing the student experience in reaching their potential is a fundamental goal for the future of HE. The report outlines that improving resource efficiency can only be achieved by taking advantage of economies of scale and opportunities for sharing services through a framework of encouraging and facilitating institutional mergers. However, this (HEA, 2011) neglects to acknowledge of the career guidance service on a national scale while addressing the scope for shared services across the HE as a more systematic approach to improve efficiency and reduce costs.

However, according to Hazelkorn and Massaro (2010) a fiscal tightening deflationary strategy was adopted by the Irish Government; the aim of which was to reduce costs and increase competitiveness through institutional mergers, criticising academic contracts and the
absorption of the HEA into the DES. The focus now is on sustainability and quality in the HE system with a context of global competitiveness and the reality of the post-2008 Irish economy (Hazelkorn, 2013). Furthermore, objective 4.5 of the Action Plan for Education (DES 2017, p.13) outlines that to enhance support for learners to make informed career choices a “review of the guidance services, tools and careers information for students and adults and recommends changes to improve services”. It is clear from the above literature that the government are aware of the importance of the career guidance service at third level. However, to meet the demands of student population, more finance and resources are needed.

2.3.2 Career Guidance in Higher Education Institutes

The development of a formal guidance service in third level colleges in Ireland can be traced back to 1902 with the establishment of a University Appointments Association in Trinity College Dublin ‘to assist students and graduates of the University to obtain appointments and employment at home and abroad’ (NGF, 2007 p.28). Furthermore, Lairio and Penttine (2006) state that due to the present transformations in the working environment, career guidance services must meet the requirements of a new kind. Watts (2007) highlights the pressure to expand access to guidance services, without an equal increase in resources. According to research carried out by Merkac and Dolinsek (2013), career centres in many colleges, universities and institutions can differ depending on four main elements: range of services, methods of work, involvement of environment and population. A key finding is that career counselling for students to improve their employability is absent in higher education institutions across Europe (Merkac and Dolinsek, 2013). Nonetheless, the direct link between recruitment and retention is, according to Ceperley (2013), beginning to be recognised by senior leaders in higher education. Dey and Cruzvergara (2014) pinpoint that by elevating HE career services (changes to titles, reporting lines, and resources) and giving their leadership more institutional influence to convene internal and external stakeholders, this will help the service in the long term. The active engagement with all stakeholders within an institution uniquely positions the career guidance service as one of few services that must encapsulate all elements of an institution and its daily routine (Smith, 2014).

Research carried out by Jensen and Higgins (2009) highlights that the recession and the downturn in the economy by 2009 have caused a shift in the provision of college services in the U.K. This shift is due to an increased demand by the key stakeholders (government, faculty, students, parents, and alumni) for accountability (Dey and Cruzvergara, 2014). As a
consequence the HE career guidance service is now shifting from a traditional transactional model toward a customized connection model which emphasises experiential and mentoring learning, connections that are meaningful to employment and internship opportunities, and specialised career development support. Furthermore, Watts (2013) argues that only through greater investment in career services, can the services provided evolve from just a resource that students seek when they graduate to a significant element of the student experience.

Madabar (2004) argues that due to the advances in technology and the influx in third level education, e-guidance has become a new approach to providing guidance at a distance. Bright (2015) states that the career service is evolving into an ecosystem rather than a place with the concept of a ‘community’ and the careers centre is simply not just a brick-and-mortar location anymore. According to Christie (2014) the responsibility of student success across all aspects of progression is shared by the full HE institution community. In order to connect key stakeholders with the aim of developing an ‘ecosystem’, the network of career professionals across an institution need to become active, while meeting the need for career services virtually and across the campus (Watts and Dent, 2008). The theory above has highlighted the need for an approach centred around an ecosystem, however this according to the author, must be built on the foundations of past models. The career services at third level must continue to build relationships to establish communities that service the students and alumni professionals’ career needs for a lifetime. The creation of communities and flexibility in service delivery will ensure an increase in connections, the institutions’ network can be leveraged to ensure collaboration and connection in an environment of trust which will lead to opportunity, progression, and success (Charles and Jackson, 2010).

2.4 Conclusion

The environment of the Higher Education career service is multifaceted and challenging. There is recognition in the literature that a wider range of services and increased funding is required to adapt to the needs of the ever evolving student (DES 2016b). In light of policy it is evident that the role of the guidance counsellor at HE has now changed along with the theoretical methods of working with current students. It is apparent from the literature review that this is a complex issue, hence the need for an examination of the current situation. The aim of this research is to explore the reason why students at Higher Education use the career service through highlighting the role that career advisors have in the delivery of the service across Ireland.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the research methodology and the methods used in this research study. It commences with the primary and secondary research questions that support the study. Discussed in this chapter, are issues related to validity, reflexivity, and ethics.

3.1 Research Questions

Thomas (2013) refers to the research question as a means of directing the methods of examination and formulates the issues to be investigated. The research question allows for the construction of a single question that acceptably identifies the objectives of the study being undertaken (Thomas, 2013). Furthermore, the research question is seen as the cornerstone, the question that ultimately guides the research (Punch, 2009). Blaxter et al., (2010) argue that before an appropriate research methodology is selected a number of important key questions need to address the phenomena being researched. According to Cohen et al., (2011) research questions hold the key to unlocking the framework which can be translated into the objectives of the study.

3.1.1 Primary and Secondary Research Questions

This research examined the usage by students of the career services in Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEI’s). As the career guidance service is a multifaceted one across the board with reference to the HE sector (DES 2017), which is dependent on each individual institution’s needs. Therefore, the overarching primary research question was ‘what is the level of usage of the career guidance service by students in third level education in Ireland?’.

A number of identified secondary questions also guided the study:

1. What cohorts of students use the HE career guidance service?

2. How has the career guidance service changed in its provision over the last number of years?

3. What is the individual approach of the career services in the different institutions?

4. What are the qualifications and the professional development of the career service practitioners?
In choosing a research design careful consideration of a suitable paradigm was needed to answer these research questions.

3.2 Research Design: Interpretivist

According to Mertens (2010) following the devised gap in the literature and outlining the research objectives and problem, the formulation of the research design is the next sequential step in the research process. Cohen (2011, p78) states that research design is governed by the notion of ‘fitness for purpose’, that the purposes of the research determine its design and methodology. Bager-Charleson (2014) argued that the quality of the design will depend on many factors, including the number of subjects participating, type of data collection, the variables, and the nature of the research question, combining these will form a design that is efficient which will optimise the outcome of the research.

The quantitative (positivist) and qualitative (interpretivist) paradigms are the two main methodological approaches generally used in social science research to investigate and accumulate data (Thomas 2013, Check and Schutt 2011). A paradigm is a way of observing or a belief that ultimately shapes how one views the world, a topic, and an issue as a whole. According to Thomas (2009) a paradigm in research terms refers to a manner in which we carry out investigations and use the data we uncover to explain phenomena. Check and Schutt (2011) stress that depending on the nature of the study, one technique maybe more suitable over the other, while in some research combining the two is essential to achieve objectives.

3.2.1 Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches

The positivist model can be referred to as a number of different headings scientific, quantitative, traditional and nomothetic (Thomas, 2013). Punch (2009, p. 3) defines the quantitative method as ‘research which is empirical research where the data is in the form of numbers’. A traditional view holds quantitative research as better and leading to more results that are believable (Cohen et al., 2011). While O’Dwyer and Bernauer (2014) stated that methods within the quantitative approach are deductive: they test out hypotheses and theories by assessing whether the observed data refutes or supports the original hypothesis and theory. Furthermore, quantitative research relies heavily on hypothesis effect, cause, and testing, and statistical analyses (Lichtman, 2013). Due to the approach summarizing results numerically, the research draws on a principle of scientific realism there is a single reality that can be described by numbers (Lodico et al., 2010).
However, the difficulty with a quantitative research approach is that it regards human behaviour as passive and in ‘essence controlled’ (Cohen et al. 2011 p.15). Furthermore, this method of research is that issues are only measured if known prior to the inception of the beginning of the data collection (Mertens, 2010). This is likely to be unhinged further with structured questionnaires with close ended questions, which can limit outcomes (Blaxter et al., 2010). Consequently, the findings for education can frequently be trivial, banal, and consequently of little significance. Thus, rather than determining cause and effect we may hold a higher interest in uncovering the meaning of a phenomenon for those involved through qualitative research (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

After a careful examination of both quantitative and qualitative research with the particular study in mind, it was concluded that the interpretivist paradigm (qualitative) was more appropriate to answer the research questions. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015, p.43) qualitative research can be defined as ‘an in-depth description and analysis’, while Mertens (2010, p225) states that the qualitative paradigm ‘captures holistic pictures using words’. Key words associated with this method including discovery, exploration, contextual, inductive logic, and complexity (Mertens, 2010). By utilising an interpretivist and inductive approach the researcher wished to make sense of the engagement by students with the HE career guidance service as the generation of new theory emerges from the data without imposing pre-existing expectations on the study.

With regard to this study qualitative research held many advantages (Bryman, 2012). Firstly the author believed that implementing a qualitative approach would ensure the construction of new knowledge on the topic through exploration and discovery. Furthermore, utilizing this approach has allowed for more flexibility. The author after an examination of all methods felt that personal interviewing was the most appropriate medium for the primary research. This direct contact with the respondent, permits qualitative research ‘to provide richer, deeper answers and insights’ (Gorchels 2006, p.27). The subjective nature of the interpretivist approach along with bias on behalf of the researcher can be a disadvantage (Thomas, 2013). Furthermore, due to the impact of personal viewpoint and values primary data cannot be generalized (Cohen et al., 2011). Blaxter et al., (2010) argues that an interpretivist method focuses on experiences and meaning which leave out contextual sensitivities.
3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

In this section the procedures in relation to the research approach will be discussed. The methods of data collection, access, sampling and analysis will be outlined along with the interview structure, design and administration.

3.3.1 Access and Sampling

According to Thomas (2013, p.53) “access is about getting hold of the data that you want, and where people are providing the information that you need”. The target population for this research was comprised of male and female career guidance practitioners working in the career services in Irish HEI’s. On the 22nd of February 2017 ethical approval was granted by UL’s Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee and the researcher sought to gain a suitable sample of the career guidance service from a number of these institutions. It was hoped that this strategy would ensure an assorted range of experiences, insights, and data with regard to the usage of the career service across the regions.

According to Blaxter et al., (2010) a sample is a subset that is representative of a larger population. Researchers do not have the means or the access to an entire population so it is of vital importance to generate a sample, which is representative subset of the population in its entirety (Punch, 2009). For this investigation purposive sampling was used to recruit participants based on their insights, information and experience on the research problem being examined (Bryman, 2012). It was not intended or assumed that this method of sampling would represent the entire population of third level career advisors; however it suited the research for an exploratory study (Cohen et al., 2007). Twelve career guidance practitioners were sourced from their institutions websites. On the 20th of March the respondents were issued with subject information letters and consent forms (Appendices A and B) by email which set out clearly the intentions and structure of the research study. In total eight of the twelve participants agreed to take part in the interview process. The negotiation of interviews dates then took place.

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews took place between May and June 2017, they provided reliability in that the researcher can seek out the specific information they require for the study rather than other methods which may result in a broader range of results which may be difficult to interpret (Newby, 2010). Unstructured interviews can be very informal while interviews that
are more structured can be very formal which can make the interviewee somewhat uncomfortable (Mann, 2016). Best (2012) argues that semi-structured interviews may put the participant at ease and also have the potential to get the best and most accurate results. The semi-structured approach was the most suitable for this study as they consisted of both closed and open ended questions and have the ability for questions to vary from one interview to the next (Mertens, 2010). Individual and face to face verbal interchanges are the most commonly known types of interviews (Thomas, 2013). According to Punch (2009) face to face interviews allows for flexibility as the interviewee can adjust and modify questions. This clarifies any lasting doubts, building rapport and a trustworthy relationship between both parties.

In this study, the semi-structured interview contained a set list of questions but also the inclusion of some unplanned questions. These questions, according to Blaxter et al., (2010), were used if they were relevant due to a subject that may appear during the interview. The questions were specifically designed to be sufficiently open so that the subsequent questions of the interviewee cannot be planned in advance but must be improvised in a careful and theorized way (Blaxter et al., 2010). Furthermore, Punch (2009) argues that individual in-depth interviews allow the interview to delve deeply into social and personal matters. The strengths of using a semi-structured interview with an interview schedule are that the outline increases a systematic direction for the respondents and researcher.

However, the interview method is time-consuming not only in terms of the interview itself but also the preparation and the travelling involved to the different institutions. The completion and arrangement of personal interviews are seen to entail extensive time and can be problematic from an administrative point of view (Mertens, 2010) and transcription and analysis of qualitative data collected may take time (Ary et al., 2013). In order to assist with this process, the interview schedule was structured in such a way that a maximum of two interviews were permitted each week, allowing for transcription.

Another limitation of interviews is the potential for bias (Punch 2009). It can be an issue in the interview method due to possible mistrust between both parties, or a non-deliberate misunderstanding of verbal signals (Best, 2012). Bias can also impinge on the quality and purpose along with the overall significance of the research study due to the fact that interviews are not carried out on a large scale to that of surveys or questionnaires (Check and Schutt 2011). Punch and Oancea (2014) affirm that by undertaking interviews unlike
questionnaires, the respondent is not anonymous and therefore confidential information may be retained.

However, spending time considering interview questions and schedules can ensure that they do not lead participants (Bell, 2010). Inconsistent coding of responses, poor rapport with participants and the handling of difficult questions needs to be addressed. Aurini et al., (2016) argues that rather than seeking to eliminate bias, dealing with research bias means understanding how your viewpoints can influence conducting research. The identification of predisposition and possible impacts on your research will allow you to avoid the negative ones while retain the positive effects. Therefore, throughout this research study care was taken and systems put in place to ensure that these issues were minimized by the researcher (Cohen et al., 2011).

The day before each interview took place, interviewees were contacted as a reminder and to adhere to research time parameters. Participants were made aware of the subject of the investigation and informed before the interviews that any information which they provided would only be used for the purpose of this research. According to Cohen et al., (2011) the researcher controls the questions asked, order of the interview, along with the depth of the responses, while also allowing space for spontaneity. Throughout the interview process, participants were afforded opportunities to explain their opinions, insights, and experiences on their work. Due to the flexibility and interactive nature of the interview method, enhanced observations of participants, such as eye contact, body language, facial expressions and spoken words occurred.

In total seven interviews were carried out. Four face to face interviews took place in the different HEI’s and three through the medium of Skype. They were approximately 60 minutes in duration and ensured for “accurate data” to be collected (Cohen et al., 2011, p.349). As there was restrictions on the career practitioners availability due to their busy workload the researcher carried out a three of these interviews through Skype. According to Sullivan (2012) Skype provides a solution to the collection of data under a restricted time frame, is user friendly for participations, and does not require a large financial or time investment on behalf of the researcher. The limitations of Skype are that it relies on the participants being proficient in downloading and navigating the computer application (Weller, 2005). Furthermore, the successful completion of the interview itself is dependent on
the reliance of the connection, application, and the broadband on both ends (Bertrand and Bourdeau, 2010).

The interview information is set out below (Table 3.1). This provides details about participant’s interviews, their third level setting and indicates the gender, medium and date of interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Date of Interviews</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Third Level Institution</th>
<th>Medium</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3/5/17</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Institute of Technology</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>9/5/17</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>9/05/17</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>24/05/17</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Face to Face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>9/06/17</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Institute of Technology</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>15/06/17</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Institute of Technology</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>16/06/17</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Skype</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 Interview Information

### 3.3.3 Data Analysis

This qualitative inquiry required that the collected data was organised in a meaningful way (Thomas, 2013). Analysis of qualitative data essentially begins with a process of ‘immersion’ (Braun and Clarke 2013, p.204). Through an analytic process, the researcher turned voluminous data into understandable and insightful analysis. The researcher gained an insight into the data analysis. This data analysis was underpinned by categorising, amalgamating, and incorporating the data accumulated. The constant comparative method was used in this study. According to Lichtman (2013) a constant comparative methods breaks data down into units and can be coded into categories. Categories are derived from the language and customs of a participant, and those identified by the researcher as significant to the project’s inquiry focus, while coding an incident for a category, compared with previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category (Behnsack, 2010). This constant process of comparison enabled the analyst to identify a conceptual category and subsequently define its
dimensions or properties (Packer, 2011). In this study this method will involve going through the transcribed data from the interviews again and again, comparing each element – sentence, paragraph, and phrase (Thomas, 2013). The examination of the data allowed the researcher compare the new data with existing data and categories.

3.4 Reliability and Validity of Qualitative Research

In interpretivist research the very nature of a researcher’s insider position may bring the risk of subjectivity and it may be difficult for a researcher, to maintain an objective, and dispassionate approach to the research situation (Punch, 2009). The researcher is considered an integral and live part of the investigation. A researcher must overcome and acknowledge their personal opinions and position on each topic (Cohen et al., 2011) as bias may be created which will have a direct on the primary research collection, analysis and the interpreting processes (Blaxter et al., 2010). Moreover, McLeod (2010) states that qualitative interviews and the dialogue within can be influenced by the skill and presence of the interviewer. He also questions how the results of a qualitative study can be deemed as reliable.

Cohen et al., (2011) highlight that in terms of qualitative research, reliability may be regarded as a fit between what data is recorded by researchers and the actual occurrence in the natural setting that is being researched. Reliability according to Blaxter et al., (2010) is the overall consistency of test results measured which occurs when comparing scores of two equivalent versions or on two different occasions. Reliability can therefore be referred to as the consistency of the methods of research and examines the extent to which data can be repeated. It is essential that the research is represented as accurately as possible. The researcher believes that it may be possible for two researchers to undertake a study which may come up with separate findings, but both could have relevance.

The term validity pertains to certain requirements with which research has to conform. Flick’s (2011, p.203) work issues the idea of validity of a research instrument that can be summarized in the question: ‘does the method measure what it is supposed to?’ According to Cohen et al, (2011) within qualitative research validity threats can never be removed, however, they can be reduced by increased attention to validity throughout a piece of research. Internal validity relates to how far the results of a research study can be assessed explicitly (Bell 2005). According to Punch (2009, p.217) to ‘ensure internal validity means to have better control of extraneous variables, or to eliminate rival hypotheses’. Due to the assessment of validity in relation to the circumstances and the purposes of the research, rather
than being an independent property of methods of conclusions, validity is relative (Maxwell 2013).

One method to reduce validity while also establishing credibility, is member checking – interviewees are allowed to view their interview transcripts for accuracy (Mertens 1998). Member checking was used throughout the primary research process. This according to Mertens is a means of checking internal validity. A research diary was also kept which consisted of concepts, and ideas on the research topic, along with detail information on the thesis and feedback from the supervisor. Throughout the field research thoughts, interactions, and opinions changed and updated on each individual experience. This diary ensured that influence and bias were minimized while also recognizing the researcher’s position throughout. According to Conrad and Serlin (2006) the understanding of the researcher becomes more refined over the course of data collection due to dependability methods. Validity then is something that can never be taken for granted or proven and therefore, is a goal rather than a product (Merrian 2009, p.214).

3.5 Ethical Considerations in the Research Study

Institutional approval was granted from the University of Limerick Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee on the 22nd of February 2017. Appropriate protocols and standards were used throughout the study to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of all participants – re-identifiable data such as field notes and audio transcripts, interview responses was labelled using pseudonyms and all files were password protected. Ethical principles in research can be compared to the Irish Guidance Counsellor (IGC) code of ethics guidance counsellors adhere to in their everyday roles. The researcher also followed the National Center for Guidance in Education (NCGE, 2008) Researcher Code of Ethics which consists of four pillars of ethical principles: Respect, Competence, Responsibility, and Integrity.

According to Hearne (2013) guidance researchers have a duty of care to all parties involved in their research study, and especially so to the participants who volunteer to contribute their time, energy, and intellectual capacity to the process. She outlined the two most important strategies regarding ethical conduct on research are (i) maintaining confidentiality and (ii) informed consent. Researchers must seek informed consent from participants which entails a clear understanding of the purpose of the research, how the information will be used, as well as rights relating to confidentiality, safety and privacy (Abrahams, 2007). The researcher
made initial contact with potential participants by email. This message outlined the purpose of the research, areas to be covered, data collection method and how the collected data would be used. The researcher then asked participants to sign consent forms (Appendix C) before each interview. As stated in the consent forms (Appendix C), all data could only be accessed by the investigator and research supervisor.

In order to address ethical issues one must ensure an active process of discretionary decision-making, deliberative, judgement, and professional reflexivity (Hearne, 2009). Thomas (2013 p.45) outlines that through the research process participants have a certain stake, rights, and that they should not be just ‘used’ that require a duty of care by the researcher. Murphy and Dingwall (2001, p.339) argue that ‘ethical theory’ provides a framework for undertaking research:

- ‘Non-maleficence – researchers should avoid harming participants’
- ‘Beneficence – research on human subjects should produce some positive and identifiable benefit rather than simply be carried out for its own sake’
- ‘Autonomy or self-determination – research participant’s values and decisions should be respected’
- ‘Justice – all people should be treated equally’

(Murphy and Dingwall 2011, p.339)

The morality of human conduct is deemed by Mauthner et al., (2002) as the basis of ethical concern. Furthermore, they state that in terms of social research, ethics relates to the responsibility, choice, and moral deliberation through the process of research. Ethical considerations were identified from the outset of this interpretivist study.

3.6 Reflexivity

Reflexivity deals with acknowledging and understanding the existence of researchers within the worlds they are investigating (Thomas, 2013). Their backgrounds, perceptions of research problems and opinions of paradigms can affect and influence research. The author applied reflexivity throughout the research. Reflexivity involves immediate, dynamic and continuing self-awareness (Cohen et al., 2011). King and Horrocks (2010) state that reflexivity can be used by the researcher to formalize accountability. Whilst Elliott (2005) describes being reflexive as an approach to the analyzing of personal narrative data. She suggests that there are four questions that must be asked in relation to analysis of any qualitative data:
Mann (2016) suggests that keeping a research diary encourages reflexivity through recording beliefs, assumptions, and shifts in thinking. Before undertaking the primary research within the field, this diary grew with ideas, concepts, and thoughts. As the process of data collection took place the diary changed to opinions and interactions thoughts on certain issues. This diary has also helped me to minimize bias and influence, while acknowledging the researcher’s position. To ensure that a researcher is reflexive they must also become aware of their social, personal, and cultural contexts within which they work and live to fully understand the context required to interpret our world (Etherington, 2004). Reflexivity in the form of note taking, research diary and interpersonal checking was applied to address issues related to my researcher position in this study.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the research methodology and methods utilised for this research study. Chapter four will present the data analysis and findings from the eight semi-structured interviews.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the primary findings of the research, outlines the data analysis strategy used and the overarching themes that emerged which illustrate the perceptions of the career advisors interviewed in this study.

4.1 Data Analysis Strategy

Qualitative data analysis encompasses a process of discovery that enables one to remain close to the data and form an evidence-based understanding of the research issues (Hennink et al., 2010). According to Bryman (2012) data analysis involves analysing, clarifying and ordering the information in the research data collection process. Punch (2009) argues that due to the variety of methods of analysis, a researcher must select the most appropriate medium which best suits their research approach. In this study the researcher used a qualitative method for data collection within the interpretivist paradigm. The qualitative thematic data analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2012) was at the forefront of use within this study. The framework consists of five phases, phase one involves immersing oneself in the data by reading and re-reading the textual data (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The second phases is analysing the data through coding, each code is seen as a building block of analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2012) its phase three where the shift is made from codes to themes and where the analysis starts to take shape. Throughout the fourth phase, checking quality and the developing themes are reviewed in relation to the coded data and dataset. Phase five themes are defined, summing up the essence of each individual theme. Finally the sixth phase produces the dissertation. Throughout the qualitative process the split-page method for analysing and coding transcripts as well as writing notes were used. Theme mapping was needed to re-focus the analysis at the broader level, mind-maps were deliberately chosen to help sort the different codes into themes. These techniques allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the data that can make theoretical contribution to the literature (Bryman, 2012).

The data produced by each individual was linked and mapped out in order to identify issues, as four main themes:

1. Usage of the career service by third level students
2. Provision of the career service to students

3. Students connectivity to the careers service

4. The role of the 21st century careers advisor

The demographic information related to the seven participants from seven different institutions in the study is outlined in Table 4.1. Pseudonyms are used throughout the research project to ensure anonymity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number of years’ experience as a career advisor</th>
<th>Type of Third Level Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Institute of Technology 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aoife</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>University 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>University 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Institute of Technology 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilary</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Institute of Technology 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>University 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>University 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1: Participant Background Data

4.2 Usage of the Career Service by Third Level Students

The first overarching theme highlights the usage of the career service by students, why they use it and the types of students who use it. In relation to the usage of the career guidance service at third level, all of the interviewees commented on the frequency of use by final year students in particular. Aoife who works in a university career service setting described it as:

“So in terms of usage, I suppose its fourth year pupils who I would have my most appointment’s and one to one meetings with. Again if we look at the basics it’s your CV’s, mock interviews, assessment...
preparation and employment applications that they are asking for help with. Digging deeper I am conscious that it's not only the issues I have just listed but guiding students in the right direction in terms of postgraduate studies, employability and in life”.

The interviewees all referred to the ascending level of support needed for students as they reach their final year of study. There was also a consensus that direction, support and motivation were needed by students who came for appointments. Tina stated that sometimes students want the careers advisor to make the decision for them, explaining:

“You would be surprised at the level or motivation, drive, and direction that students now need, I feel at times that students are bubble wrapped and really struggle making decisions for themselves”.

While Mary stated that some students in their final year ask ‘well what kind of career can I gain entry into with my degree?’. This highlights the issue of forward thinking, planning and research with regards to their future employability.

The findings also suggest that students who undertake work placement, co-op or work experience as a part of their third level course are the second most common year group to access the service. In all of the universities and institutions involved in this study work placement, work experience or co-op is a mandatory programme offered as a part of the majority of degree courses. However, it is not a requirement in all of them for students to visit the career service before, during or after this mandatory programme. This element of career learning is usually embedded within second or third year of a student’s course. John stated that students undertaking placement have a lot to organise with regards to applications, CV’s, and mock interviews “so they make up a huge amount of contact time within the service”. Sarah outlined that with co-op;

“Students attend a number of preparation sessions before going out, have their applications reviewed by us, and put together an online application which is also reviewed by the service”.

Five of the seven interviewees also highlighted the use of the career service by first year students. Hilary linked the volume of first year students early in semester one with regards to their course choice. At this early stage the majority of those who attend the career service “feel they have picked the wrong course and are looking for advice and options”. In summary, the evidence would suggest that students make appointments on a needs basis with the level of usage increasing as the years progressed towards the final year of study.
The findings suggest that mature students (categorised as non-traditional) use the career service more than a traditional student. According to the interviewees this population tend to have significant industry experience, however lack certain career planning skills (C.V., interview and cover letter preparation). Furthermore, mature students are more likely to need a number of appointments due to low confidence, the need for guidance on transferrable skills, mock interviews, C.V. and cover letter preparation. John stated that;

“Mature students are more demanding of the careers service, they have made a lot of career decisions, and this is their last stop, they are prepared and eager, in a sense you are working with them in a different way. I find that they are not used to selling themselves so they tend to have a higher number of appointments and always seek assurance from me.”

In addition, four of the seven interviewees outlined that, a mature student attending a career’s appointment is far more organised, prepared and rehearsed on their needs in comparison to traditional students.

4.3 Provision of the Careers Service

It is evident from the findings that change and the provision of the careers service at third level go hand in hand. To maintain an efficient and effective service, career advisors need to be able to proactively respond not only to changes in the employment markets but also in their students. Change was described by all of the seven career advisors as the means of meeting the new needs of the current cohort of students at third level. Interestingly, the findings indicate that the role of the career advisor has expanded considerably with an increase in the amount of teaching or student interaction within classrooms settings. Interviewee’s argued that the career service now actively engage in the classroom with the majority of third level career learning experiences embedded within the curriculum in some form. This interaction ensures that not only do students gain a deeper understanding of the many facets of career planning but also it increases usage of the service. The majority of the career advisors argued that the intensification of demand for their services by the student population was directly linked to this aspect of their work. For example, Thomas outlined that:

“We do a lot more group work so that we can reach more students. With the student population of 20,000 and a limited number of advisors in the college there is huge demand for the service”.
The ‘traditional’ method of one to one appointments has been transformed and expanded to a ‘non-traditional’ teaching approach and a blended type of provision. For example Mary who works in an Institute of Technology described the changing nature of the career service as:

“Before you saw every single student, now a days it’s just not feasible with our small team. However with classroom time, it is now possible to reach a vast number of students at any one time, we see it as working smarter rather than harder.”

Six of the seven interviewees stressed the importance of increased interaction with employers as another significant change in their daily work. Engagement with employers includes onsite company talks on campus, information stands, and on-campus careers fairs during the academic year. Hilary stated that:

“A member of the career service team would link up with particular employers and it would not be uncommon to make a site visit to the employers’ organisation”.

The findings suggest that there is quite a lot to gain by the career service from engagement with employers, employability links, network association, co-op links, and knowledge about specific skill requirements in the industry. However, it is also evident that liaising, negotiating, organising and planning for an employer visit, talk or careers fair is very time consuming for the careers service.

Nevertheless, according to the findings, the typical needs of the student population which include CV/mock interview preparation, personal statement advice and job/postgraduate application guidance will never change. The interviewees referred to not only working with students with regards to CV’s, but tailoring them towards the specific job requirements and ultimately targeting the role that is on offer. As employers now use assessment centres for graduate positions, it is imperative that career services provide specific mock assessment centres to ensure students have the best opportunity to gain employment. This necessitates services keeping up to date with the current employment trends across sectors.

Mary, Aoife, Sarah and John highlighted the need for students to have an online presence to expand their employability options. Aoife stated that:

“All jobs are online these days. Every single student will have an online presence and we spend a huge amount of time in workshops with regards to making an online profile”.

Sarah felt that working with students and teaching them the importance of an online profile is crucial, “as this allows us to meet the student’s needs”. She believes that students such be
proficient with their online profile. The majority of the career advisors proposed that students will benefit from this in the long-term and due to college and university courses now requiring placement, work experience or co-op this enhances their means of securing a position. Finally, the interviewees revealed that to meet the needs of the current student, the career services must focus entirely now on employability and progression.

Another issue that emerged was the shift in the provision of the career service. It is evident from the data that the provision of the career service at third level has a real focus on employability. Although the career service continues to offer essential services (mock interviews, C.V., and cover letter preparation) its new focus offers a stronger emphasis on building connections through employers. The majority of interviewees argued that the service was directly focused on gaining students employment, whether in a traditional one to one appointment or a non-traditional teaching interaction. For example Aoife outlined the focus as:

“I suppose the thing is about our service, everything is about employability, the minute you go into the classroom in their first year it’s about employability. Some students coming into us have no work experience what so ever, so what can they do, we just get them to think about employability. It’s the fundamentals which allow them to think about what is involved in getting a job.”

It has become clear that this shift and focus on employability is strategic for future funding and viability of the career service. Tina stated that “we have to be able to show that we are a key element of the university”, which can be achieved, according to Hilary, “through statistics and figures of each third level graduate”. The First Destinations Report provides essential information, which John argues “can in fact provide more funding for positions at our service”. The career advisors are therefore actively seeking out appointments with students rather than sitting back and waiting for the student population to appear at their door.

4.4 Students Connectivity to the Career Service

The third theme which emerged relates to the connectivity to the careers service. All of the interviewee’s indicated that there are at least three methods in their careers service to make an appointment and in each case one of these is an online medium. The students’ engage with the service through physically calling into the office, email or telephone communication, booking an appointment online or social media. Sarah spoke in-depth of the importance of accessibility and students being able to engage with the service through as many methods as possible. Tina endorsed this view arguing that students are so busy now with third level life,
“time has become a precious commodity for them, so students don’t walk in to make an appointment anymore”. It is, therefore, according to Thomas, “important to allow them to access appointments with speed through the tech savvy world that they have grown up in”. In terms of connectivity the two universities involved in this study have stand-alone career service websites where students can register, login and make appointments for the service. Interviewee’s from both universities described that upon students’ initial registration with their university they are automatically set up with access to the online careers system. All appointments can then be automatically tracked, the system updates each career advisor’s diary and can be accounted for on the system used for making a booking. Whereas, the Institutes of Technology career services in this study did not appear to have this medium of connectivity. They have a more manual appointment service, where an email, dropping-in or telephoning are the main methods used to book an appointment.

A common issue that emerged in the findings is the type of connectivity process used by the career service to deliver information to service users. The interviewees spoke of a wide variety of methods used to promote their facilities within the career service. They referred to the traditional methods (email, word of mouth, notice boards, TV screens on campus, newsletters, career stands, career posters) as essential tools to accessing the student population. Tina argued that the “process of connecting with students is dependent on the piece of information or career event that we wish to use”.

Furthermore, social media now plays a central role in reaching the large student population. All of the career advisors were particularly enthusiastic about this method of communication. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are the three specific platforms employed by the majority of the career advisors. John stated that:

“We have seen an increase in connecting with students on social media platforms; we can now reach the majority of the student population with a click of a button”.

However, a majority number of interviewees stressed that social media did not correlate with an increased number of one on one appointments.

Another issue that emerged in the findings is the importance of academic ‘buy-in’ from different institutional departments and lecturers in promoting the careers service. Across the HE sector the career service needs to gain access to the student population through as many mediums as possible. The findings indicate the important of teamwork and strong
relationships with Course Directors to connect with the students. Aoife stressed the need to work with the different academic departments;

“Due to the large student population now residing within the university, we need to access students through their courses and ultimately the course directors hold the key. Without their buy in, it would be extremely hard to access the student population”.

This interaction between the careers advisors and the student population enhances the appointments made to the service as students can put a face to the name of the career advisors.

4.5 The Role of the 21st Century Career Advisor

The final overarching theme that emerged is the role of the careers advisor in third level education in the 21st century. The findings indicate that the different facets of the role include planning, organising, communicating, guiding, supporting, careers counselling, giving advice and managing the service. Nonetheless, one to one appointments will always be the mainstay of the careers advisor’s work. However, due to the needs and population of the current students in third level, the career service needs to be able to reach the entire population. Each interviewee stressed that teaching in the classroom or delivering content in lecture halls is an on-going activity throughout the entire student academic year. Also during the first semester the majority of career services now have career fairs on campus along with employer talks and presentations throughout the year. All interviewees spoke of the importance of liaising with employers on an ongoing basis and the time needed to do so.

According to all career advisors planning, organising and researching are key aspects of the career advisors role and generally take place during the months of May to August when there are less student appointments and employers on campus. However, this appears to be dependent on the specific institution due to the number of staff within the career service, amount of funding available and the amount of resources within the career service. According to the majority of interviewee’s their role involves working with particular students over a period of time. This highlights a development process, which helps students find out what they are genuinely interested in and want from a career. The majority of interviewees outlined the importance of pinpointing the area of interest and what they need to do to make this happen. The findings suggest that this process involves a significant amount of work that takes time and the career advisor may just be one step along the student’s career path. Thomas stated that:
“It is my job to help them see their career or the direction of one. I suppose I’m here to give them hope, support, and confidence to say that they are employable and that there are options out there for them.”

Working with students in an individual setting was described by interviewees as anywhere from a coaching, mentoring, motivation, guidance, to a counselling session. The process takes time, Sarah mentioned that “every student needs to know that this can be a teasing out process, I often tell them that Rome wasn’t built in a day”. The role of a career’s advisor therefore encapsulates not only a daily routine with tasks and responsibilities, but also a ‘way of being’ to ensure the progression of the student at third level.

A major theme in all of the interviews was the diversity of qualifications, expertise and capabilities of the team in the career service. Four of the seven interviewees had, in addition to their undergraduate qualification, more than one postgraduate qualification. Sarah stated that:

“Due to the level of qualification that I hold, I feel comfortable that I have the expertise to work with students that not only seek employment but who wish to progress onto the post-graduate level.”

In this study, the interviewees had a variety of undergraduate degrees, these ranged from psychology, sociology, social science, business, arts, and human resource management. Notwithstanding this, all of them hold a post-graduate course in some form of guidance counselling. Hilary argued the importance of this:

“All of the staff within the service come from a different background, so there is an interesting mix and everyone brings something different to the table. The diversity allows us to pick each other’s brain, which works quite well actually.”

Accordingly, there was a clear consensus that it was important and beneficial for practitioners to have a wide breath of knowledge and expertise within the careers service due to the vast range of questions, queries, and issues that arose on a weekly basis.

Furthermore, all of the interviewees highlighted the need to undertake Continuous Professional Development (CPD) on a yearly basis, but also spoke of the accessibility of extra training within and outside of the campus in which they reside. The Higher Education College Association (HECA) provides a wide range of courses on an ongoing basis at reduced rates across the academic calendar. They also survey all of their members each year with a remit of addressing any shortfalls in knowledge, skills, and training needs. Moreover,
it was clear from all interviewees that the opportunity of in-house training arises within all of
the institutions. Aoife stated:

“The university runs a lot of training here so it’s great, CPD can also be requested in-house or
outside if a member of the team has a shortfall in their skills.”

CPD takes place right across the entire year with interviewees highlighting that opportunities
arise more often than not when the service is not at full capacity with regards to student
appointments. In some of the institutions the career advisors who are based in large career
services such as Universities, attend at least two yearly CPD sessions. The careers service
benefits from this as the career advisors gain new knowledge and expertise which can be
shared amongst the team within the service. Whereas in the smaller career services such as
the Institutes of Technology, careers advisors have the responsibility of maintaining the
service by themselves and have to undertake more CPD training programs throughout the
year.

An important finding relates to the role within the different types of institutions. The role of
the ‘sole’ career’s advisor in the institutes of technology is very much an isolated one.
Although some aspects of the role require solitary work; researching, administration, and e-
guidance. However, in every third level setting in this study, apart from Institute 1, a team of
career advisors were present within the service. Mary is the sole careers advisor within this
Institute which has one and a half administration support staff on site. She describes the
staffing levels within the service as:

“Nowhere near enough staff within the service, when you think of the student population, the
engagement with employers and the logistics, all are very time consuming”

The findings suggest the need for a team of career advisors within a career’s service whether
an Institute of Technology or University. Interestingly the institutes of technology across this
study have a lower number of career’s advisors working in their service compared to the
universities. John, Hilary and Thomas have all highlighted the sheer volume of appointments
and work that the career’s advisor must now take on, a contributing fact is the increase
growth in the student population at third level.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented an analysis of the findings and an illumination of a number of key
issues from interviews with seven participants who are practicing career advisors in the
Higher Education sector. Data was presented under a number of significant themes. The overall findings of the investigation will be discussed in Chapter five.
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present a synthesised discussion through the predominant themes that emerged in the research findings in the context of the original research questions.

5.1 Original Research Questions

The primary research question in this study was ‘what is the level of usage of the career guidance service by students in third level education in Ireland?’. The secondary research questions were built on the foundations of this primary research question. The key findings highlight the nature of usage of the career service by students in HE and identifies that as students’ progress from the first to final year of their studies this increases substantially. It is also evident that final year students are the most frequent users as their attention turns towards life and employment after third level. It is also apparent that graduate employers have quite a strong presence across the academic year due to the employability agenda, with graduate deadlines increasing the demand for the career service. The findings also explicate that role of the 21st century HE career advisor is a multidimensional one involving accountability, building relationships inside and outside the campus and using a variety of methods to ensure that the majority of the population gain access to the career service. Finally the study elucidates the benefits of working as part of a team within a HE career service in comparison to an isolating role where there may only be one adviser and a high demand for resources.

The three overarching themes that emerged in the findings are:

1. Usage of HE Career Services by Students
2. The Role of the Career Advisor in HE
3. Supporting Graduate Employability

5.2 Usage of HE Career Services by Students

The systematic delivery of a quality guidance experience that accommodates the needs of all individual students is an aspiration across the HE sector. The lack of HE policy with regards to the institutional delivery of career services in Ireland has created inconsistent levels of service for students across the sector, while career advisors are struggling to cope with
increasing demands from the student population (HEA, 2011; NGF, 2007). As the third level student population increases, career guidance services are being forced to expand their access without an equal increase in resources (Watts, 2013). However, only through investment, can the career services evolve from a resource to a significant element of the student experience (Plant, 2012). The findings of this study support the view that the HE career service is currently under pressure to ensure that it meets the needs of students.

The environment that guidance is delivered within should emphasise the intrinsic view of allowing students to develop acceptance and awareness of talents, explore opportunities, take responsibility for themselves, grow in independence and follow through on informed choices (Pipkins, 2014). Due to the unpredictable careers reality, individuals must be resilient and flexible with an appreciation of the role of lifelong learning in career progression (Arulmani et al., 2014). The NGF (2007) outlines the competencies, skills, and knowledge that guidance aims to develop amongst individuals at different stages of their life span. A key responsibility for each HE career advisors is to respect, recognise and acknowledge the life stage of each student while finding a means to promote their progression (Ledwith, 2014).

According to the ELGPN (2014, p.73) lifelong guidance supports “good career decision-making and effective transitions to the workplace, helping to ensure that graduates’ learning and skills are well used”. The findings of this current study support Volmari et al.’s (2009) definition of professional guidance practice as flexible and adaptive. The career advisors in this study identified the delivery of a lifelong guidance experience to students as central to the delivery of a HE career service. A number of them stated specifically that it contributes to the successful progression of students. Furthermore, this study’s findings support the idea that students can gain an understanding of their future direction from engaging with their HE career service. This interaction between both parties can fundamentally improve their chances of success on both a personal and professional level.

Vocational guidance enhances employment opportunities for individuals (Watts et al., 2010). Interestingly, all of the participants in this study made reference to final year students as being the highest level of users of the career service. Graduate programme deadlines across the academic year directly influence the fluctuating demand for the career service. The findings suggest that the majority of one to one appointments for final year students take place in the first semester of their final year, which would indicate the influence that
employers hold through the yearly graduate deadlines. Direction, support, and advice were the main areas of guidance work with students during their career appointments.

Furthermore, students undertaking work experience/co-op programmes, or work placement during their HE course appear to be the next highest cohort to use the career services. Through engaging in these types of career development initiatives, students gain an insight to the specific skills needed to transition to employment. Making this a requirement across the third level sector may in fact be due to the unpredictable careers reality, where resilience and flexibility are now essential (Ante, 2016). This requirement is in line with the DES (2016) Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 which aims to develop entrepreneurship in education, promote lifelong learning and improve career guidance to ensure students make well informed choices.

The current findings elucidate the different measures that the HE career services employ to maximise their reach to students in the specific HE institutions investigated. However, it is difficult to measure such an impact as a separate entity. It is evident that intangible activities such as the personal progression of clients are less valued due to the complexity of measurement within the third level sector. Tools of assessment which facilitate self-understanding outlined by Kidd (2006), gaining a clear appreciation of oneself derived by Ali and Graham (1996) and Savickas’s (2005) evolving meaning of experiences through a narrative-based career counselling seem to hold less importance due to HE priorities. All of career advisors detailed the large volume of student interactions on a daily basis, yet they may only see an individual student once and for a short appointment. Each career service and advisor echoed the same strategy while working with students on a one to one basis. This involved making students less dependent on the career service and helping them to develop autonomy, self-responsibility and strategies to manage their careers.

A key finding highlighted in this study is the diverse student population attending appointments with the HE career service. According to the ELGPN (2015) a central strategic aim of the third level sector is a greater emphasis on participation, equality and access in education. However, the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD 2017) states that diversity is relatively new to the third level education system. The findings support the view that the student population demographic is now more diverse than ever. The increase in international students, springboard initiatives, along with new ‘access’ routes the student population has opened the door to more non-traditional students. While it appears that
the career advisors in this study agree that new issues are now arising within the service due to students originating from different cultures, countries and mind-sets. An increase level of support is now needed by this student demographic from not only the career service but support services at third level.

The findings also demonstrate the range of methods used by HE career services to connect with their students. Charles and Jackson (2010) assert that the creation of flexible methods of service delivery can increase connections within the institutions network. According to the findings, the traditional methods (email, telephone, walk-ins, posters, presentations, noticeboards, newsletters, career stands) will always be the mainstay of delivery. However, employing a social media platform to get a message to a certain demographic is now a priority for the career service at third level, due to the speed, cost and reaches of the platform (Kettunen et al., 2015). Similarly, in this study a number of career advisors highlighted the popularity, power and influence of social media to connect with the student population. Some stated that without Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram connecting with the entire student cohort would be next to impossible. The influence of social media platforms on engagement between career services and students is changing. This change allows for the exchange of ideas and innovation, while the access barriers to career professionals are reduced. Nonetheless, a number of the career advisors also stated that using social media does not increase the amount of one-to-one student appointments’.

5.3 The Role of Career’s Advisor in HE

The second theme identifies that the role of the HE career advisor has changed significantly over the last ten years in Irish institutions. The absence of a career guidance policy at this level appears to create an inconsistent service across the country, while career advisors are now struggling to accommodate the current student population. A number of participants in this study cited the lack of resources within their career service to meet the growing needs of students. The findings concur with Simon (2014) who highlights the pressure now being placed on guidance services to expand access, without an equal increase in resources.

According to Dey and Cruzvergara (2014) greater accountability and visibility is the focus at third level, the value of career services have been recognized by institutions who have started to increase the amount of resources, staff, funds, support programs, grants, initiatives and support that is prominently located on campus. It has become evident that such accountability at third level within the Irish HE career services has become a key focus of the work of the
career adviser. Hearne (2010) has identified that hard outcomes are considered more valuable than softer, personal outcomes experienced by individual students and that securing employment has become the key hard outcome in Irish guidance policy discourse. In this study all of the career advisors spoke of the explicit importance of measurement and accountability in their service. This key information provides the foundations for their first destinations report.

There was a consensus amongst the research participants the need for accountability of the career services. The model used at university level within this study appears to be more advanced than the system used by the institutes of technology. It has become evident the benefits for University 1 were gaining from the use of this system just in terms of time management and accountability. Additionally, the findings support the assertion that all career advisors and career services across the third level sector would benefit from the use of a Careers Connect system.

The type of career guidance activities delivered by HE career services can vary depending on population, methods of work, range of services and involvement of environment (Merkac and Dolinsek’s, 2013). The provision of a blended type of career service which encapsulates both the traditional one-on-one appointments and in class teaching approach emerged in the current study. The shift to classroom delivery appears to be a result of the need to engage with the wider student population which cannot be done in a one-to-one setting due to the lack of career advisors within the service (Dey and Cruzvergara, 2014). Likewise, the delivery of career guidance in the curriculum through classroom pedagogy was evident in this study. However, this depended on the specific third level institutions with some of the being more supportive than others. Nevertheless, all of the participants spoke of the increase in student appointments as a direct result of the classroom interaction. It has become clear that career advisors do not wait for students to make appointments and engage with their respective service. They are out in the lecture halls, visible on campus and in classrooms actively seeking student engagement with their service.

Vocational guidance in the HE career service has also evolved considerably from Parson’s (1909) model to a more modern holistic approach. According to Savickas (2012) a key aspect of vocational guidance is enabling clients with their career decision making. The role of the guidance counsellor can be separated into the following distinct areas personal, educational

“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.”

(IGC 2016, p.37)

The findings of this study are that the ‘career choice’ element is only one aspect of the role of the career advisor in HE. Personal guidance involves working with students who are dealing with personal issues, referring students to outside agencies was also cited as a core role. Guiding students with career choices and information on postgraduate courses was referred to as vocational/educational guidance.

The findings also illustrate that the mature student population in HE is a more demanding career service user. The general view of the career advisors within this study is that the mature students are a very valuable asset to the third level population. However, the need for reassurance, career direction, confidence, help with transitions and transferable skills emerged as being the prominent areas for which the mature students seek help. It is evident that mature students navigate social structures, employment and education on an ongoing basis. Therefore, HE career advisors need specific types of intervention in their guidance work with mature students to support their transition across the lifespan (Bassot et al., 2013).

Employability modules which include interview/C.V. preparation and the importance of a LinkedIn profile are a number of items on the agenda for students engaging in lectures taught by the career service (Watts et al., 2010). All of the Institutes of Technology and Universities in this study now require students to undertake work experience/co-op in some form along with increasing number career modules. It is clear that no two HE institutions are identical, however it is evident the intention and direction of the third level sector. Teaching students within the third level setting, with them outside the career service and undertaking work experience as a mandatory module may give students a greater chance of identifying the skills needed to ensure employability regardless of their life stage. This approach may allow the career service to meet the requirements of the new kind of student, which according to Lairio and Penttine (2006) have a broader range of expectations, needs and lifestyle options.
Overall, the findings of this study indicate that HE career advisors use a number of different theoretical approaches in their one to one work with students. The narrative based career counselling approach (Savickas, 2005), person-centred approach (Rogers, 1942), skilled helper model (Egan, 2008) and Ali and Graham (1996) career counselling model all emerged in the findings. It is evident that facilitating self-efficacy and empowering students is a key aspect of the work of the career advisor. This supports Stebleton’s (2010) view that the primary focus of the work of career advisors is on helping individuals to develop their skills within the area of career management. Empowering students will ensure they make career decisions (NCGE, 2016) however, directing students to take an empowerment stance on their own may be in effect due to a lack of resources in the third level career service.

The role of the HE career advisor is getting the client to be proactive, design and facilitate change, equip individuals with a clear appreciation of themselves (Pipkins, et al., 2014). In the current study all seven career advisors were realistic and aware of the reach of the career service with regards to the student population. Whilst the advisors expressed their frustration about the issue there was a feeling that it was often students with less ‘social’ capital who do not seek out help need it the most.

However, whilst these varied guidance counselling approaches are being employed by career advisors, there seems to be a shift in the focus of the service across the country. A number of career advisors within the university sector in this study argued that the focus of their work now is primarily on accountability and the generation of career service statistics which in turn have the ability to attract funding, resources and students to the university. This is evident in the literature also where the attainment of additional resources is the current transformation of the careers service (Dey and Cruzvergara, 2014). The research feels that the standard operating practice for all career services is the ability to effectively collect data and craft a compelling story. The reputation of the careers service, engagement of stakeholders and first-destinations data are now the new measures of success for every career service. Although the model of engagement may no longer be on counselling, it may be still a critical intervention within each service.

The findings also illuminate that HE career advisors are entering the profession from a wide variety of backgrounds. Alongside specific undergraduate qualifications all of the career advisors in this study had completed accredited guidance counselling programmes. This diversity of undergraduate/postgraduate qualifications ensures a very good knowledge base
for the career services when dealing with students on a daily basis. Furthermore, both on-site and off-site training in the form of CPD is regularly undertaken by them. According to Pipkins et al., (2014) consistent and continuous training, which includes practice, reflection and specific feedback can rejuvenate skill development and learning. Career advisors benefit from working within a team as they have the ability to learn from one another when it comes to CPD. This echoes the argument by Wenger et al., (2002) that sharing experiences of new training with team members can build a community of practice. Kimble and Hildreth (2008) outlined that communities of practice involve groups of people who collectively learn for an interest and want to do better through regular interaction. This supports the findings in this study where the career advisors based within a team environment teach their fellow team members which leads to incorporating theory into practice within the Universities. In contrast, smaller career services based in the Institutes of Technologies with a low number of career advisors need to attend more CPD training as the benefits of community practice is not present within their service. It has become evident that due to the ever changing environment of career guidance, the career advisors need to learn and practice methodologies that are continuously which are grounded in a specific training and professional development program.

5.4 Supporting Graduate Employability in HE

The literature review highlighted that the contribution of a supportive network throughout the third level community can ensure a positive lifelong guidance individual experience (Dey and Cruzvergara, 2014). Developing and building relations with all stakeholders is a key milestone for the delivery of a lifelong guidance service (McMorrow, 2016). It is evident from the research findings that the creation of professional links, partnerships, and relationships between academics and the career services at third level allows for more access to the student population. This access can increase the interaction between the service and student, which improves the career learning experience. Furthermore, it has been identified that when there are strong relationships between key stakeholders in third level settings, students gain a better and more flexible skills base. This can ensure responsible graduates while enhancing their employability and job searching capabilities (Dey and Cruzvergara, 2014). It is apparent that relations built on campus with stakeholders by the career service may support the lifelong guidance strategy, this therefore must remain a central pillar in the focus for career advisors for the future prospects of the third level students.
Raschauer and Resch’s (2016) argue that employment policy is now tied to the education system. According to the ELGPN (2014) lifelong guidance should involve working people and employers, while also providing active experiences of workplaces for individuals. The current findings suggest that the lifelong guidance experience of the student involves strong engagement with employers, both on and off campus. In this study all of the career advisors referred to the importance of employer interactions through talks/presentations, career fairs, and co/op/work experience in the provision of the service and the future employability of graduates.

However, a common issue that emerged in the current findings is the amount of time that is spent by career advisors contacting and building up relations. This supports graduate employability as;

“A stronger emphasis on building connections through partnerships with employers from a variety of sectors, experiential learning, mentoring, and developing career communities of learners and networkers will engage students for a lifetime”

(Smith 2014, p.8)

Within the HE career services relationships with employers has transformed from solely work placement, to networking, relationship building and teaching employment skills (Dey and Cruzvergara, 2014; Hoover et al., 2013). The importance of not only establishing external relations but maintaining them with employers on and off campus is now a key focus for the HE career guidance service emerged in this stud. The benefits of involving employers in various career guidance activities ensure a symbiotic engagement with the student population (Smith, 2014). In addition, harnessing the support of the team and resources of the career guidance service at university level to address societal issues related to employment can contribute to the betterment of the student population and enhancement of the skills of the university career service advisors (Seth et al., 2014). It is evident from the findings that the career guidance service at university campuses where a team of advisors are present gained a better foothold with employer relations due to the amount of advisors present to share the work load, of contacting, networking and in some instances making a visit to the organisations site. Meanwhile, HE career services with a sole career advisor have much more work to do in terms of connecting, communicating and networking with employers due to lack of resources.
The benefits of graduates gaining employment tend to overshadow the time, work and collaboration between the career service and outside organisations. According to Neary et al., (2017) career management skills is the knowledge, skills, attributes and attitudes that individuals require in order to manage their career. Gaining employment within third level as a part of the work experience module will enhance student’s career management skills (Brown, 2014). This concurs with the views of the career advisors in this study, of the importance of work placement. It is clear that the concept of career management skills gained during this work placement module will in fact support the wide age demographic of students at third level to develop their careers throughout life. It may be concluded that external relations with employers is just one intervention to ensure student employability, and can work effectively for the benefit of all parties.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the primary research findings in the context of the literature. The issues that were examined provide a number of key insights into the area of career guidance provision at third level. Chapter six will conclude the research study by proposing areas of further research which have emerged from this investigation.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

The overall purpose of this chapter is to present the conclusions drawn from within the context of the objectives and aim of this study. The strengths and limitations of the study are presented, recommendations provided and personal learning for the researcher identified.

6.1 Summary of findings

The objective aim of this study was to examine the level of usage of the career service by students in third level education in Ireland. While the primary aim remained the same for this study, there were more focused objectives relating to participants’ perceptions on the profession of guidance counselling in Ireland, the changed nature of the work role, the individual approach of each career service, and connectivity strategies. In order to investigate the topic in more detail this expanded study involved interviews with seven post-primary guidance counsellors from different schools to the previous study.

The career service within the HE sector in Ireland is utilised by students from all age groups, backgrounds and walks of life. This research study highlighted that students will make appointments to the career service on a needs basic. Final years students make the most appointments to the service due to their position on the academic ladder, the majority of these appointments are based within semester one of the HE calendar. Students undertaking work experience/co-op or placement as part of their course are the second most popular student demographic to have contact time with the career service. The majority of third level settings make it mandatory for students to connect, link in and use the service before, during and after applying for a position in any organisation.

Furthermore, a number of key findings emerged from the investigations, which elucidate current issues in post primary guidance practice, namely:

- The changing nature of the provision of the service.

- The role of the career advisor in HE

- The individual approach of the career guidance service at third level.

6.1.1 The Changing Nature of the Provision of the Service
It appears that the career services in HE has evolved since its inception and adapted to various models following the needs of society, university, economic conditions, trends and demands of the labour market (Dey and Cruzvergara, 2014). Participants interpret it as a shift in the delivery has been connected to changes in cultural, economic, political, social and generational norms. It seems that rather than a place or location on campus, the notion of career services becoming an ecosystem reinforced by a community concept is now unfolding. Career services must become a presence that permeates the institutional culture and experience. According to Contomanolis and Steinfeld (2014) students’ success is a shared responsibility by the entire third level community which one resides in.

The research findings indicate the importance for the career services meeting students outside the career guidance office; this can be in their space across campus, virtually or in the classrooms or lecture halls. Consequently, creating communities and delivering services outside the walls of an office requires flexibility on behalf of the career service, this will according to participants ensure increase connections. It is evident that the career advisors can leverage the third level network to bring and connect everyone, while collaborating in an environment where trust and influence can lead to opportunity and success.

**6.1.2 The Role of the Career Advisor in HE**

The role of the career advisor appears to be multifarious. The study suggests that the level of expectations have emerged necessitating the career advisors to re-define their value intention for the service user. Students due to the vast amount of easy accessible information on the internet are looking for customized information that will be specific to their needs and wants. The profile of the career advisors was presented in the research study as being prominent in all aspects of building and maintaining relationships with stakeholders. According to Dey and Cruzvergara (2014) relationship building with key stakeholders allows career services to transform into hubs of connectivity and ensure a more tailored approach, strategy, and advice to the service user.

One element of work that has changed the role of career advisors is the use of technology, and of social media. It has become evident that due to the increase in the student population, the career service relies heavily on technology such as email’s and social media platforms to provide a customized service and create a community, while also engaging virtually and beyond the normal working day. The study suggests that this form of connectivity with key stakeholders is the most cost effective and proficient means of transferring information.
Technology allows the career service to customize advice that is specific to the needs of the student, while allowing for continuous opportunities to connect with individuals in their selected course, industry or field (Kettunen et al., 2014).

6.1.3 The Individual Approach of the Career Guidance Service at Third Level

Findings from this study suggest that the focus of the third level career guidance service is ensuring student gain employability skills and graduate employability. Participants highlighted this as a central theme to their service, stating that career advisors are now teaching employability modules in the majority of year groups. Consequently this classroom interaction has increased their number of individual student one to one appointments, as students can put a face to the name of specific advisors. The shift towards securing students employability is linked to the accountability of the career service (Dey and Cruzvergara, 2014). It would appear that central to maintaining and funding the career service is accountability with success measures for career service are shifting towards collecting data and crafting a story that is compelling.

6.2 Strengths and Limitations of the Study

6.2.1 Strengths

This research study holds a number of key strengths. An approach based upon an interpretivist paradigm ensures depth and insight into the career advisor’s experiences of the career guidance service which may not have occurred in a quantitative study (Thomas, 2013). The use of a thematic approach to data analysis was pivotal to affording the insight needed into research questions and informed policy development (Cohen et al., 2007). Gaining entry to seven practicing career advisors across the third level spectrum ensured the development of tick descriptions by the researcher of the Higher Education system. These detailed descriptions broaden the researcher’s understanding while helping to develop participants’ stories of their experiences, which may not have been possible through quantitative research (Thomas, 2013). Semi-structured face to face interviews ensured the opportunity to seek clarification while enabling direct observation. Additionally, the application of rigour was applied when the transcripts of the interviews were sent to be checked by each interviewee. A wide diversity of experience within this research study was established due to the wide variety of the career service third level location. The limited research in the area of career
guidance and the usage of the services at third level in Ireland motivated the researcher throughout the study.

6.2.2 Limitations

While sustained procedures for data analysis and rigor were utilised by the researcher, bias on a personal level can be an issue in qualitative research. The management of bias and analyses of data were dependent on the sole researcher. Management of this was the acknowledgment of the researcher’s assumptions and position on the topic as well as his role in the research process (Cohen et al., 2007). Furthermore, a diary which was kept by the researcher included thoughts on opinions on responses, comments from participants and details of participant interaction (Thomas, 2013). Due to the size of the sample within this study, drawing generalisations that are qualitative in nature from the findings can be difficult. However, the authenticity and trustworthiness of the data was ensured by pinpointing the depth of the narratives supplied by the participants (Bryman, 2012). It is therefore hoped that the findings can be transferable to career guidance services working in the third level sector.

6.3 Recommendations for Future Policy and Practice

Based on the findings of this study, a number of recommendations with regards to policy, practice and research can be made as follows:

1. A systematic roll out by the Department of Education of a career guidance policy across the third level sector may ensure a systematic approach to the work of career advisors.

2. A review of the role of the career advisors at third level career guidance services should be undertaken due to the increase of student enrolment and demand on the service over the last number of years.

3. A team of career advisors is needed within all third level institutions to successfully maintain an effective and efficient career guidance service.

4. Furthermore, to meet the needs and demands of the current crop of students subsequent funding and resources are urgently required.
5. Practitioners must be conscious of taking on too much work and becoming overwhelmed. Work must be realistic in terms of what they can achieve, given the diminished and limited resources available to them.

6. The level of graduate employers influence at third level such be scrutinized, and with that the subsequent demands that the career guidance service receives need to be addressed.

7. Senior management and career advisors should have regular meetings about the nature and the volume of work which practitioners are undertaking.

8. Further research on a national scale on the usage of the career service could be conducted. This would include all Higher Education authorities, and address the experiences of career advisors across the entire country.

6.4 Reflexivity in Relation to Personal Learning

I arrived with a number of preconceptions to this research study based upon my experience at third level which includes a number of years at undergraduate and postgraduate in different HE providers around Ireland. According to Cohen et al., (2011) one’s own attitudes and assumptions must be pigeonholed for the entirety of the study. Because the researcher is also a participant and practitioners in the action research, they are part of the social world that they are studying (Blaxter et al., 2010). According to Punch (2009) reflexivity is a central theme to action research. Reflecting on my assumptions, my experience and the many occasions when I held conversations with fellow students with regards to the career guidance service at third level, gave me food for thought. I often saw myself questioning the level of guidance, reach and support available to third level students. I also felt that the provision and the approach of the service provided at third level differed at the three different third level institutions within which I studied. An approach based on reflexivity was rigorously applied throughout the study, this took the form of research discussions with the researcher’s supervisor and reflective journaling in a diary. This approach ensured that I was challenged to be acutely aware of my views and position while also monitoring these factors (Cohen et al., 2011). I found conversations based on reflection with my supervisor extremely effective and with the use of a diary allowed me to monitor thoughts and reactions to individual responses, this ensures a low level of researcher bias (Mertens, 2010).
The honesty and openness experienced by the researcher when conducting interviews was a humbling experience. At times it was clear the pressure and challenge that career advisors face on a daily basis within the third level sector. A fundamental learning curve came when the individual career advisors were given time to think and reflect throughout their interviewees. This opportunity and space gave individual career advisors time to talk about their experience and in an open, non-judgemental manner. I feel that this is an important learning methodologically which could be introduced across all sectors of career guidance services as a means of learning about oneself. The researcher also gained an appreciation of the third level career guidance service and the value of such a service to the student population, as at times is something that is taken for granted. The depth of the insights picked up from this research can be passed onto career guidance service with which the researcher resides at post-primary level and is hoped to enrich the sixth year students with vital information about the services at third level.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter concludes the study on the examination of the level of usage of the career guidance service at third level. It has provided an overview of the main findings of the research within the remit of the aims and objectives of the study. The limitations and strengths of the study were highlighted while a number of recommendations were presented. The chapter concluded with a reflexive assessment of the research on a personal level.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Subject Information Letter

UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUI MNIGH

EHSREC no. 2017_02_05_EHS

Date: 20/03/17

Research title: An exploration of the level of usage of the career guidance service by students in third level education in Ireland

Dear Guidance Counsellor,

I am currently a student of the MA Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development course with the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr. Lucy Hearne. As part of my studies I have to complete a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling.

In my research I aim to explore the topic of the usage by students of the career guidance service in third level institutions’ in Ireland. In order to gather information on the topic I would appreciate if you would agree to participate in a face-to-face or Skype interview. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes and be held in a confidential location agreeable to you.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. Interviews will be audio tape recorded and the data will be destroyed after the analysis process. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time prior to the data analysis stage. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.
The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. It is important to note that your name or the HE institution will not be used in the reporting of the research. If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Damien Nugent
Supervisor: Dr. Lucy Hearne
Phone number: 061-202931
UL Email address: 12013293@studentmail.ul.ie
Email address: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

Yours sincerely
________________________
Damien Nugent

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EHSREC no. 2017_02_05_EHS). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee

EHS Faculty Office
University of Limerick
Tel (061) 234101
ehsresearchethics@ul.ie
Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Title of research study: An exploration of the level of usage of the career guidance service by students in third level education in Ireland

I have read the Subject Information Letter and understand in detail the particulars of the research project. I understand that the identity of the participants and the institution will not be revealed at any stage in the reporting to the research study. The conditions involved in the research which are designed to protect the privacy of participants and respect their contributions are:

Participation is entirely voluntary

Participants are free to withdraw at any time in the process and any contributions made will be subsequently destroyed.

The interview will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the researcher and the research supervisor. Excerpts from the interview may be made part of the final research dissertation, but under no circumstances will names or any identifying characteristics be included.

I hereby agree to take part in the research study being carried out by Damien Nugent.

Signature:______________________
Printed Name:____________________

Researchers’ Name:_______________
Appendix C: Interview Framework

Objective 1: To evaluate the current usage of services at the career guidance service

How do students make appointments for the service?

What is the most common year group to use the service?

Why are students making appointments for the service?

What is the busiest time of year for appointments for the service?

Objective 2: To establish if the career guidance service has changed the service provided over the last ten years

Can you outline the main changes to that have occurred in providing your careers services during the past ten years?

What are the current needs of your students and how does this differ from the students of 2006?

What are the main tasks you undertake in your role within the career guidance service on a weekly basis?

Has the number of employees changed over the last number of years within the service that is provided?
Objective 3: To examine the professional development and qualifications of the career service

Can you list and explain your qualifications and any continuing professional development that you have undertaken in your current position?

How often is continuing professional development offered to staff members within your service?

Do you see any shortfalls in training in your current position?

What skills are essential in your current role?

Objective 4: To determine the individual approach of the services provided

How does the career service promote itself?

Who are the key stakeholders in the service?

How would you best describe your role in the career guidance service?

What do you think is the most effective method of passing on knowledge and information to service users?
Appendix D: Overarching Themes and Map of Issues

Themes:

1. Usage of the career service by third level students
2. Provision of the career service to students
3. Students connectivity to the careers service
4. The role of the 21st century careers advisor

Issues:

1. Student population vs number of career advisors
2. Lack of a career guidance policy
3. Accountability
4. Non-traditional methods
5. The disparity of resources between institutions
6. The sole career advisor
7. Provision of the service
8. Connectivity
9. E-guidance
10. Time management
11. Qualifications
12. CPD
13. Vocational Guidance
14. Student employability
15. Employer relations
Appendix E: Extracts from Research Diary

Interview 1

I was extremely nervous before my first interview; however I had some dealing with Mary in the past so we were quick to pick up from where we left off. I was not overly happy with the way the interview started as I did not set professional boundaries and lacked an appropriate introduction to the interview. I also had each objective divided into different sections and I felt that this hindered the overall experience and flow of the interview. The day before the interview took place, I had a good look at the interview questions and to be honest I feel that I answered the questions myself in my own mind with regards to the institution that I was going to visit. This is a learning curve that needs to be addressed before entering my next interview. Throughout the interview I felt relaxed, but found at times that I was too relaxed and needed to remind myself that I needed to stay focused throughout. I also noticed that Mary while answering a specific question would move off topic at times, which was a challenge and I didn’t feel comfortable reeling her back in as she had given up her time and volunteered to take part of my research. I also felt that although I used probing questions which evidentially directed the interview, I didn’t probe Mary as much as I would have liked. This was because I think I felt that at times I interrupted the flow by probing her. I think I learned quiet a lot from my first interview and overall I was pleased with the way things went.

Interview 2

Second time round I felt a lot less nervous that my first interview. I believe I reflected on my first interview process and took some key learning from it. Immediately, I felt at easy with Aoife, she was a very open, honest and pleasant to not afraid to speak her mind. The interview started well as I felt that an introduction was extremely important to the research and things began to flow on the back of my opening statement. Aoife was very vocal about her experiences and required very little prompting; this I believe allowed me to feel at ease. I listened and tried to let the interview flow as much as possible. While the interview was taking place I became distracted as some of my own assumptions came into my mind. As soon as I was conscious of this I regained focus on the present. I felt that throughout the interview a good rapport was building and Aoife was opening up more and more to the interview. At the end of the interview I thanked Aoife for being so open and honest throughout.
Interview 3 and 4

Both interview three and four took place on the same day, the first at ten o clock and the second at twelve o clock. I decided to catch two birds with one stone this week and arrived on the third level campus with plenty of time to spare. I soon realised early on in both interviews that each interviewee was conscious that I was interviewing a fellow colleague in their department. I felt that at times they were holding back on answering, that’s what my gut feeling was telling me. However, the research study would have not been completed without Aoife and Sarah giving up their free time.

In both interviews Aoife and Sarah spoke openly about their experiences at the third level career. It was refreshing to hear that both Aoife and Sarah had their own ideas, thoughts, and methods of working within the same department and shared them so freely with me. I really gained an in-depth insight into the workings of the career service at third level by having the two interviews on the same day with the same department and third level provider. However, it was clear to see that by the start of the second interview I was really beginning to get tired. I found myself several times trying to focus and concentrate on the questions, the interviewee and their response. A key learning curve for me was that one interview per day was more than enough research for anyone. After I came out after my second interview and while I was reflecting back on both interviews, I began to get mixed up on who said what.

Interview 5

Interview five was where again I felt nervous, it was the first time I would be using Skype to undertake primary research. The day before the schedule I had arrange to connect with Hilary to confirm our Skype interview which in hindsight was a good idea, as it was something that was new to both of us. I was interviewing Hilary who I had built up connection due to us swapping a number of different emails. I found Hilary resistant at first to my questions, so therefore prompted her throughout. Also by giving her more time to answer the questions, Hilary soon began to come out of his shell so to speak. I felt that I had grown in confidence throughout this interview, and that if I felt that an answer given by the interviewee needed more exploration, I felt comfortable in asking those extra questions. I was also struck by her calm tone and openness when talking about students who struggled with personal issues. When the interview was in full flow I was struck by her passion for his job. I found myself really in control of this interview, opening/closing it well and feeling comfortable in my skin when things got going. I am not more comfortable than ever with all parts of the interview.
Interview 6

Interview six had to be re-arranged on a number of different occasions due to work commitments. Finally speaking to Thomas the first time, he out right apologised with the clash and it highlighted to me the unpredictability of the role. However, as soon as the interview started I had a sense that it would go according to plan. I got sense that Thomas was very willing to share not only his experiences but that of his career service. With the obvious work constrains, I started the interview by wholeheartedly thanking Thomas for his time and input. I found that once Thomas started there was no stopping him, thinking to myself was he getting everything of his chest. I soon realised that after certain questions that I needed to re-direct the flow of the interview as his answers were very long and I was conscious that we only had an hour to address the four main objectives within the study. Close to the end of the hour I really felt under pressure to ensure we captured the relevant information and felt that things were a little rushed as Thomas had an appointment straight after our interview. Throughout the interview I used some basic counselling skills such as paraphrasing, listening skills and questioning to get a deeper level of understanding.

Interview 7

Tina was my last interviewee within the process of collecting primary data and again it took place using Skype. While setting up the connection to Skype took a while due to technical issues, we immediately hit it off as we have both had graduate from the same university. It was evident the benefits of using Skype, however at times throughout this interview the connection wasn’t the best. This meant that I had to ask Tina on a number of occasions to repeat what she had answered to specific questions and at times I felt that she was getting frustrated at the process. Tina was very honest and straight forward from the outset, she made me relax due to the fact that she fully engaged with the questions. She answered in great detail everything that she was asked, but I was conscious of the time with which she taking to answer each question. It was very easy to read Tina’s body language throughout the interview process which at times was animated when she passionately spoke about her role as a career advisor. All in all I felt that I enjoyed the process of interviewing. I have learned quiet a lot about the interview process and feel that I can use this learning when it comes to working with individual students in the post-primary setting.