

Title of Research:

An Evaluation of the Graduate Diploma in Guidance Counselling at the University of Limerick: Implications for policy and practice in initial education for Guidance Counsellors.

Name of Researcher:

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Date:

21st of February 2012

Timeframe including details of when the research was carried out:

<u>Date</u>	<u>Task Completed</u>
January 09	Literature review
February 09	Methodology & abstract submission for IAEVG and ESAI conferences.
May 09	Collected data for phase one of research (course directors personal narratives)
May 09	Data analysis for phase 1 and IAEVG/ESAI conferences attended
June 09	Collected data for phase two of research (questionnaires)
August 09-Dec 09	Prepared 40,000 word document and Transferred to PhD
May –Sept 2010	Collected data for phase three of research (interviews)
Sept-Dec 2010	Data analysis for phase three
Jan 2011-Jan 2012	Final thesis write up, submission, Viva and graduation.

Brief outline of research idea:

The focus of the study is on a guidance counsellor education programme offered by the University of Limerick (UL). The study evaluates the extent to which the programme is in keeping with both national and international policy requirements in relation to the initial education of guidance counsellors. Good practice and areas for improvement in guidance counsellor education were identified, acknowledged and affirmed. A mixed methodology approach was applied using an adapted model of evaluation informed by the '3Ps' Model of Teaching and Learning (Biggs, 2001). The model explored the input, process and output factors of the programme to determine constructive alignment among the factors.

Summary of research aims:

The underlying aim of the research was to explore the extent to which the Graduate Diploma in Guidance Counselling at the University of Limerick is in keeping with both international and national policy requirements in relation to the initial education of guidance counsellors. The objectives of the study were to:

- Conduct an evaluation of the UL programme using an input-process-output model, which has been informed by Biggs' '3P' model of Teaching and Learning (1999) and a framework developed by The Canadian Research Working Group (Borgen, Hiebert and Michaud, 2009) on Evidence-Based Practice in Career Development.
- Explore the complexities of an initial education programme for guidance counsellors.
- Reveal the key narratives of practising guidance counsellors.
- Identify good practice that will enhance the provision of guidance counsellor initial education.

The research study was designed to inform current and future programme reviews in order to,

- Enhance the programme where appropriate.

- Add an international dimension to the programme where suitable.
- Celebrate the programme's achievements by acknowledging and affirming good practice.

The central research questions were devised in light of both the aim and objectives of the research and the rationale for undertaking the study. These questions not only provided a framework in which to evaluate the UL programme but also the opportunity for knowledge creation and understanding.

Firstly, input factors were considered. Biggs (2001: 139) describes student factors and teaching context as essential presage factors to consider when evaluating an education programme.

1. The Programme: The evolution of the UL programme is tracked in order to establish the context from which the current input factors have emerged. Specific input factors and the relationship they have with the current course content and methodology are explored. These factors include the course director's personal narrative, the formally documented aims of the programme and the national professional body policy provision.
2. The Participant: This research segment explores student input factors such as student background characteristics and reasons why participants chose to undertake a guidance counsellor education programme.

Process factors as outlined by Biggs (2001: 139) are the focus for the following research question. However, when answering this research question the relationship between process and outcomes as described by Borgen et al. (2009: 15) is considered.

3. This section of the study explores the learning-focused activities and ongoing approaches to learning that take place as part of the programme such as the focus on personal development, the experiential learning approach and the emphasis on reflective practice.

Borgen et al. (2009: 15) highlight learning outcomes, personal outcomes and impact outcomes as indicators of 'client', or in this case 'graduate', change.

4. The output section of this evaluation determines the career paths of the programme graduates. Both personal learning outcomes and competency-based learning outcomes are ascertained, along with the continuing professional development needs of graduates.
5. The final section of this study involves referring to input, process and output factors of other European programmes in order to critically analyse the UL programme from a European viewpoint.

A Model to Evaluate the UL GDGC

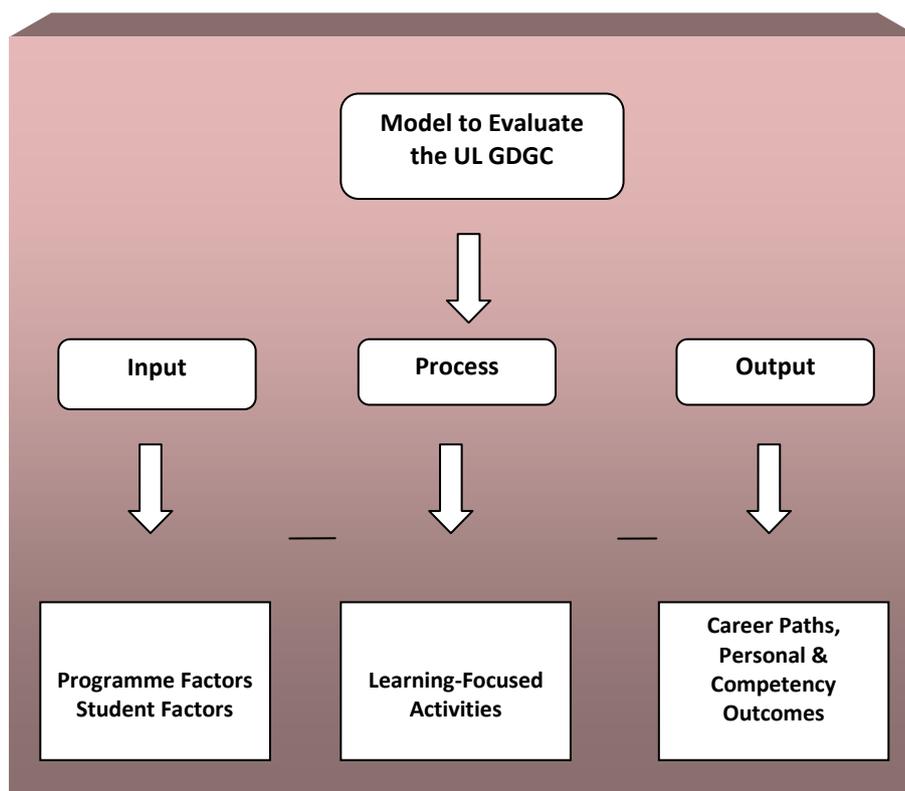


Figure 1: Adapted model informed by Biggs (The '3P' Model of Teaching and Learning) and a framework developed by The Canadian Research Working Group (Borgen, Hiebert and Michaud, 2009) on Evidence-Based Practice in Career Development

Outline of methodology used including details of how ethical considerations were addressed:

Underlying the term 'evaluation' in the context of the study was the motivation to seek knowledge, explore and illuminate new learning in the area of guidance counsellor education. Therefore the study can be described as principally an evaluation with illuminative and exploratory characteristics. Four main phases were conducted in order to evaluate the UL programme. An initial/preliminary phase was conducted at the outset (September 2008). This element of the research was qualitative in nature. The method used during this phase was unstructured telephone conversations to obtain personal experiences and oral folklore, therefore providing contextual understanding on the development of guidance counsellor education programmes throughout Ireland. Conversations took place with:

1. A retired guidance counsellor who is familiar with the development of the UL programme and is a tutor on the programme.
2. A tutor on a European programme.
3. A past director of the National Professional body for guidance counsellors (The Institute of Guidance Counsellors) who was central to the development of guidance counselling in Ireland.

This qualitative method was used to establish the context for the research and to generate preliminary research questions. The phase is not used to present any concrete research findings from which to draw discussion points or arguments. However, alongside the early literature reviewed, it did ignite my interest in gaining course directors' perspectives before obtaining data from the research participants (graduates from the GDGC in UL).

Phase one involved obtaining personal narrative accounts from course directors. This phase was conducted in January 2009 and it was qualitative in its approach. Personal narrative accounts from two course directors of guidance counsellor education programmes were sought. These presented insights into the roles and influences course directors have on the guidance counsellor education programme they direct. This phase of the research emerged from the preliminary conversations that noted

the strong influence of the course directors on guidance counsellor education programmes. Findings from this phase correlate with the input stage of the model for evaluation applied in this study.

The second phase consisted of a questionnaire that contained both qualitative and quantitative components. This phase took place in June 2009 and involved a postal questionnaire that was distributed to 232 graduates of the UL guidance counsellor education programme. This research phase generated data documenting information from all responding graduates of the programme. Both open- and closed-ended questions were included in the questionnaire, in line with the objective of generating initial baseline data documenting topics such as the career paths of graduates. In addition the graduates' experiences of the programme were recorded.

Interviews were selected as the final stage of the research. The interviews took place in September 2010. This third phase consisted of in-depth interviews with graduates who had completed the questionnaire phase. Thirteen graduates were interviewed. During these interviews interesting themes that emerged from the previous research phases were explored in depth.

In alignment with these phases the following tasks were also completed:

- Ethical approval for the research study was gained from the UL Research Ethics Committee.
- A pilot study was applied to both the questionnaire and interview phases.
- Connected research tasks such as papers and presentations.
- Gaining additional research skills: In order to enhance the research study I attended courses including questionnaire design, sampling, SPSS, Nvivo and para-counselling. I also gained a Certificate in Counselling and Psychotherapy and Reality Therapy.
- A personal methodological reflection.

Thomas (2009: 70) discusses the importance of being clear about what methodology is. Methodology, he states, is the study of method, while 'ology' means to talk about or study something. He describes the methodology chapter as follows:

It is a discussion of the methods that you are going to be using and more importantly why you are using them (2009: 70).

The adapted model for evaluating the UL GDGC reflects my commitment to teaching and learning aligned with the nature of the evaluation. My position can be described as an evaluator drawing on the illuminative and exploratory characteristics of the study. The adapted evaluation model reflects this research stance appropriately. From determining the paradigm in which this study is best placed a constructivist methodology emerges as the research combines a positivist, and to a greater extent interpretive, paradigm approach. A mixed methodology for this study heightened reliability and validity, thereby strengthening the robustness of the research. The research methods in the four phases of the research (preliminary, first, second and third phases) provide both qualitative and quantitative data. Any research that involves humans must be considerate of the effect the study could potentially have. In light of the sensitive nature of guidance counselling it was essential that the well-being of all participants was maintained. Ethical considerations were highlighted from the outset. Thomas (2009) believes that application forms for ethical approval principally act to protect universities from litigation: 'Its procedures seemed to be more about self-protection than protection of research participants'. My ethical stance stems beyond self-protection to deeper concerns regarding potential emotional risks to participants. Knowing that personal development was a significant part of the UL GDGC, I was aware that by asking participants to reflect on the UL programme I may in turn ignite difficulties graduates encountered during the personal development stages of the programme. Every effort was made to reduce the risk of such a scenario developing. Ethical standards and protocols were used throughout the study to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants. Ethical principles in research can be compared to the code of ethics guidance counsellors adhere to in their everyday roles. For example, the Code of Ethics (2007) of the national professional body for Irish guidance counsellors (The Institute for Guidance Counsellors) describes how,

Guidance counsellors respect the dignity, integrity and welfare of their clients. The professional services offered by guidance

counsellors involve a special relationship of trust and confidence (IGC, undated).

The NCGE also devised a Researcher Code of Ethics in 2008. The code consists of four overall ethical principles that include a number of specific ethical standards. I chose these ethical guidelines to inform this research study. The four principles are listed as:

1. Respect for the Rights and Dignity of the Person
 2. Competence
 3. Responsibility
 4. Integrity
- (NCGE, 2008: 1)

Within the heading of respect for the rights and dignity of the person, sub-headings of privacy and confidentiality, informed consent and freedom of consent and self-determination have all been considered in this study. The relationship between the researcher and the researched must be one of trust and respect. I have sought ethical awareness and continuing professional development in relation to research methods in order to be a competent researcher. Within the heading of responsibility I have upheld accountability and responsibility.

Be sensitive to the needs, current issues, and problems of society when determining research questions to be asked, services to be developed, information to be collected, or the interpretation of results/findings (NCGE, 2008: 13).

I have sought to promote integrity in the undertaking of this research by being honest and accurate in conducting and presenting the research. It is fundamental to seek ethical approval from a relevant ethics committee. Throughout the entire research process I kept the value of truthfulness and maintaining participant dignity as the main priorities.

Ethically this involves taking the view that people own the facts of their lives and should be able to control the use that is made of them in research (Hammersley 1994: 190).

The nature of the study involved a relationship of trust between the research participants and myself. Voluntary participation, informed consent and confidentiality were applied to the questionnaire and interview phases of the research. Consent is described by Thomas (2009: 149) as an agreement of people to take part in the study. Thomas (2009) indicates that more than a simple agreement is required: informed consent is necessary. In other words, potential participants should understand what they are agreeing to (Thomas, 2009: 149). In order to be respectful of each participant and represent their expressed experiences accurately, care was taken to ensure the research was as reliable and valid as possible.

Summary of background reading:

Past literature (OECD, 2002; Sultana, 2004; Hearne, 2010; and Hughes, 2011) has emphasised the importance of quality assurance and evaluation studies in the area of guidance and counselling. It has been recognised nationally that changes are occurring to both the practice of guidance counselling and the profile of the guidance counsellor. The Department of Education and Science (now the Department of Education and Skills (DES)) inspectorate review of guidance counselling in Ireland (2006) stated that,

The training of future guidance counsellors needs to be considered at policy level in the context of the increasing age profile of the current cohort and the recent improvements in the schedule of hours allocated to schools for guidance. It is likely that there will be an increased demand for places on the initial training courses over the coming years and this will require forward planning (2006: 129).

More specifically, it has been recommended that research into guidance counsellor education programmes should be carried out in order to observe the roles guidance counsellors are undertaking. The most significant existing research that relates to this study is the 'Guidance for Life' report by the NGF (2007). This report suggests ensuring that people working in guidance are well trained and supported, with proper quality assurance procedures in place NGF (2007). Furthermore, the report describes the contribution that research such as this study will offer, by ensuring the UL programme provides high quality education so that its graduates are prepared to contribute successfully to both Irish and European guidance services. The European Union Resolution on 'Strengthening Policies, Systems and Practices in the Field of Guidance Throughout Life in Europe', adopted in May 2004, is cited in the NGF's 'Guidance for Life' report. It states that,

High quality guidance provision throughout life is a key component of education, training and employability strategies to attain the strategic goal of Europe becoming the world's most dynamic knowledge-based society by 2010 (2007: 34).

The NGF report indicates that 'quality graduates' will play a part in the provision of an effective guidance service. It also suggests that,

Effective guidance provision is also considered to play a key role in promoting social inclusion, equality, and active citizenship by encouraging and supporting individuals' participation in education and training and in assisting them to attain self-fulfilment (2007: 35).

In order to achieve an effective guidance provision, the NGF report suggests that the nature and extent of current guidance services must be reviewed and such a review must include an evaluation of the training and qualification requirements for all guidance workers (2007: 35). While reports such as 'Guidance for All' (ESRI, 2006) and 'Guidance for Life' (NGF, 2007) do contain informative studies into the whole

guidance service in Ireland, both recognise the need for exploration and evaluation of guidance counsellor education programmes. This research is both original and relevant to the guidance counselling community as it addresses an identified gap in research. The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) has published a report on professionalising career guidance and guidance counsellor competencies, which states that,

Appropriate initial and further training of guidance counsellors is crucial as they have a central position in guidance service delivery and development (Cedefop, 2009: 1).

The report also describes the need for research studies that provide findings in relation to guidance counsellor education programmes:

There is a need to seek evidence on what levels and forms of training are effective in developing career guidance practice which is able to deliver the client outcomes needed to achieve desired policy outcomes in each country and to meet EU goals (Cedefop, 2009: 93).

Nationally, McKenna et al. (1997) reinforce the importance of studies like this:

In the Irish context it might be argued that existing research gives us a good deal of information regarding the historical development of the guidance service, the role of the guidance counsellor in schools in terms of the types of work undertaken, the division of time, and to an extent the type of student problems encountered. What is by and large missing from the research to date is rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of the guidance service, in terms of achievement of goals; the nature and extent of training of counsellors and adequacy of support services. (McKenna et al., 1997: 12)

In the literature review chapter, the complexity regarding the various understandings of guidance counselling was presented along with a review of literature surrounding the reasons why graduates choose to participate in a guidance counselling education programme such as the UL programme. The focus of the guidance counsellor education programme was reviewed. The theoretical orientations that guidance counsellors are expected to apply in practice were provided. Furthermore, the Finnish guidance counselling context was introduced for comparison. Reflecting and summarising on the literature outlined in thesis, areas of inquiry relevant to this study became apparent. Defining the term 'guidance counselling' was identified as somewhat of a problematic professional crux. A contemporary understanding of the term must include the three dimensions as outlined by the IGC (educational, vocational/career, personal/social), support a lifelong learning approach, be culturally inclusive, recognise the whole guidance counselling service and, most importantly, place the client/student at the centre of the process. Acknowledging my own 'worldview' or 'value system', an understanding of guidance counselling that reflects a societal stance rather than focusing on economic gain is better placed. The NGF (2007) offers this understanding.

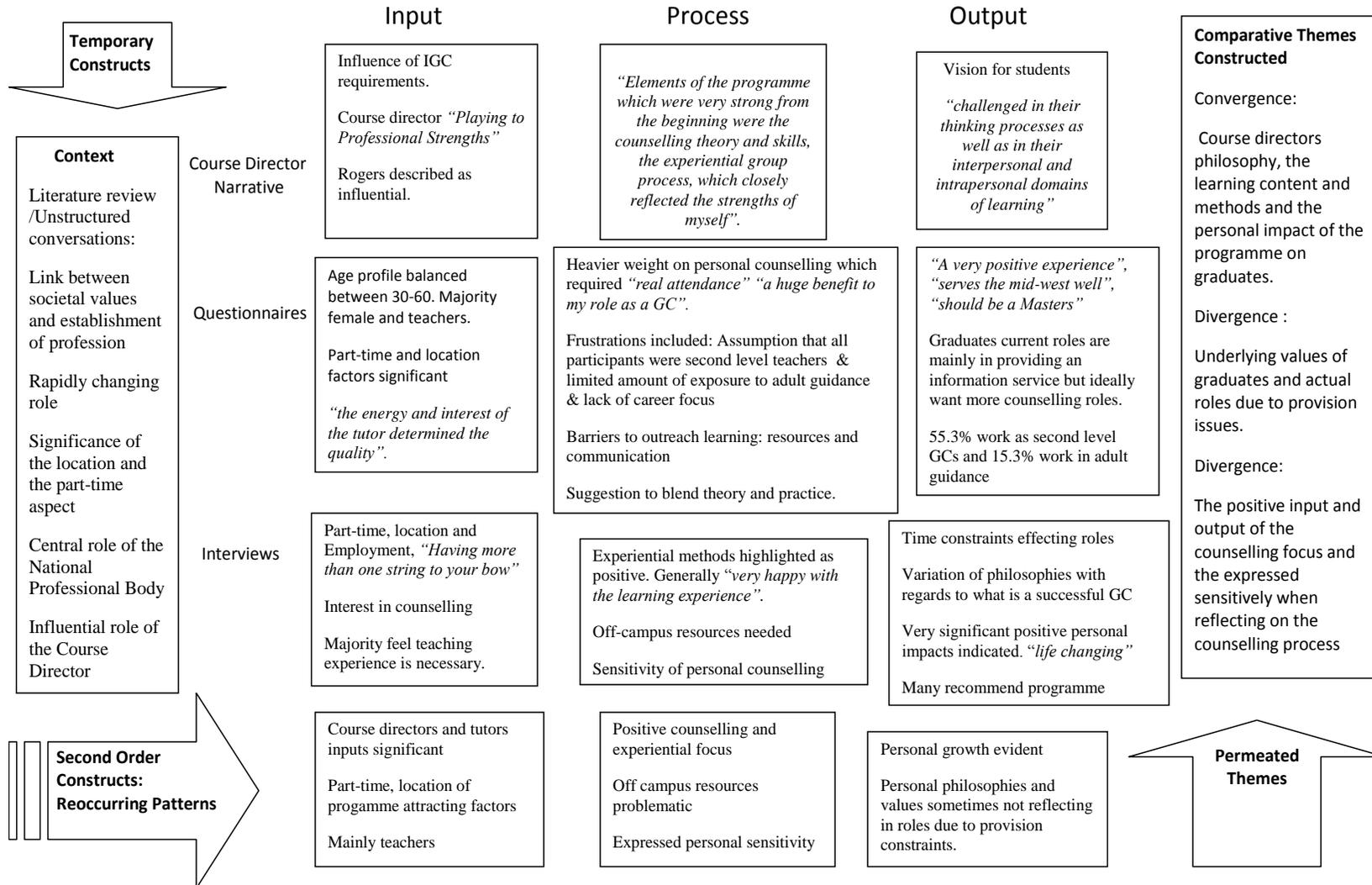
Guidance facilitates people throughout their lives to manage their own educational, training, occupational, personal, social, and life choices to reach their full potential and contribute to the development of a better society (NGF, 2007: 6).

Complex overarching bodies of knowledge were outlined in the literature review. A link between theoretical orientations and wider societal, economic and education values was identified. More recently, convergence between career and counselling theoretical literature was highlighted; however, guidance counselling is yet to establish itself as a separate body of knowledge. This theoretical gap may lead to a professional identity issue. When reflecting on literature two important theoretical dimensions stand out. Firstly, the discourse surrounding the importance of personal counselling affirms its position within guidance counsellor education programmes (Johns; 2003; Mearns, 1998); and secondly, Corey's description of the limitations of

integrative counselling, and in particular the problems with eclectic models of counselling leading to surface knowledge rather than depth of knowledge. Guidance counsellor education programmes must adhere to requirements in relation to the focus of their content; however, the issues with providing 'a little bit of everything' must be highlighted. Corey indicates that a guidance counsellor must have a theoretical foundation approach that is close to a practitioner's own 'worldview'. Considering this comment and adhering to national and international competency frameworks is a significant challenge for guidance counsellor education programmes. The literature recognised the guidance counsellor's 'worldview' and 'personal attributes' as central to the guidance counselling process. An area of interest to this study is why people choose guidance counsellor education. Outlining literature on continuing professional development for teachers indicates that it may be due to personal, political or professional reasons. Arguments for and against teachers becoming guidance counsellors exist. This study observes the expressed opinions of graduates from the UL GDGC in order to add to the discourse surrounding the topic. Establishing a clear understanding of the term 'guidance counselling', and having determined the professional role of the guidance counsellor, this literature review recognises that a greater sense of identity in terms of each individual guidance counsellor would in turn lead to a greater sense of professionalism. International insights indicate a broad similarity between Irish and Finnish guidance counsellors in terms of the non-guidance-related roles they are providing in schools. Further insights examined the specific comparison between findings from Numminen and Kasurinen (2003) and findings from this study.

Overview of research findings and recommendations:

The construct map (see below) provides a visual summary of the research findings presented in the thesis. This map also shows the interconnections between data gained through each of the phases and places this data within the input, process, output framework. Comparative constructs emerge from reviewing the map and identifying areas of convergence and divergence.



The research concluded that the UL programme models good practice in terms of being constructively aligned and providing quality graduates who have participated in an education programme which promotes and facilitates a deep level of learning.

The UL programme can be defined as meeting the requirements set down by the IGC. The thesis indicates that for a sustainable approach to the curriculum development of a guidance counsellor education programme an inclusive relationship between the course director and the IGC is required. Overall the input factors to the UL programme provide the opportunity for deep learning. When observing the process and output factors of the UL programme deep learning occurs for the most part. Indications of surface learning are explored in the thesis with the expressed sensitivity to personal counselling being highlighted as problematic. The findings provide many examples of good practice in guidance counsellor education such as balancing the content of the guidance counsellor education programme, attributing to high CPD levels and the positives of experiential learning. Areas for improvement were also highlighted such as providing access to resources for outreach students and balancing the second level focus of the programme to accommodate guidance offered in settings across the lifespan.

How the research has contributed to your professional development:

From the perspective of my professional development as a teacher, this study has provided a depth of understanding into one of the most currently topical, significant services (guidance counselling) which is provided in Irish education and adult guidance settings. I have developed an increased awareness of the multitude of factors that support and impinge on a learning programme. Overall, the study has brought to light the value of an effective guidance counselling system. Furthermore, I feel from undertaking this study that I have gained many research skills. These skills can be put into action for any future investigations which I may undertake. Completing research answers questions and brings clarity to an issue. No doubt

many questions will come to light throughout my future teaching career. Acknowledging my own 'worldview' or 'value system' was the pinnacle point, which in turn led to required self-belief in order to complete the study. My worldview reflects an understanding of guidance counselling which is placed as a societal stance rather than focusing on economic gain.

How this research will benefit the teaching profession and the wider education community:

This research provides a timely evaluation of a programme selected by many teachers as a course for enhancing professional development. The findings benefit the course director, policy makers, NCGE, DES the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, graduates of the programme and prospective Guidance Counsellors throughout the educational community. By improving the course the continuing professional development experience of teachers participating in this course will be improved. Provision for guidance in Irish second level education has been challenged since the completion of this study due to budget announcements. The Minister for Education, Ruairi Quinn has confirmed that schools will no longer receive a specific allowance for guidance counsellors. In Section 9 (c) of the 1998 Education Act it states that a school shall use its available resources to "ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices". However what constitutes 'appropriate guidance' has been the subject of much debate (ERSI, 2006). This doctorate thesis contributes to this discourse in terms of the affirming the value of the three-dimensional model (educational, vocational/career, personal/social) of guidance counselling. However the doctorate findings identify guidance counsellors expressions of concern surrounding a lack of provision in order to provide for 'appropriate guidance'. I propose that further research is required in order to extend on this finding in order to align with contemporary needs in the guidance community so that it moves towards evidence-based school counselling practice (Dimmitt, 2007). The next research agenda for the guidance and the wider education profession is to conduct a study which recommends how 'appropriate guidance' can be provided through

alternative/flexible models of guidance counselling for example, specialisation of career guidance/counselling, the effective use of ICT, group guidance counselling or a revised whole school approach to guidance counselling.

For further information on this research report contact Jennifer.liston@ul.ie.
