

Careers and Labour Market Information in Ireland

Expert Group on 
Future Skills Needs

to the Minister for Enterprise,
Trade and Employment and
the Minister for Education
and Science

Forfás 

A Study for the

Expert Group on Future Skills Needs

by

Siobhan Phillips, Ann Clarke and Jessica Classon

Careers and Labour Market Information in Ireland

To the Minister for Enterprise,
Trade and Employment and
the Minister for Education
and Science

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the schools, colleges, Youthreach centre, Institutes of Technology, universities, individuals and guidance professionals who made thoughtful and knowledgeable contributions to this study. We would also like to thank the members of the Steering Group and other contributors for their informed and considered input. Finally we would like to extend our particular gratitude to the Forfás Secretariat to the Expert Group for their active support and encouragement over the course of this research.

A full list of contributors is presented in Appendix 6.

Foreword by Ms Anne Heraty, *Chairperson*, Expert Group on Future Skills Needs

On behalf of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, I am pleased to submit this report to the Ministers for Enterprise Trade and Employment, Michael Martin T.D. and Education and Science, Mary Hanafin T.D.

At a time when the skills needs of the Irish economy are changing more rapidly than ever before, it is of the utmost importance that all current and potential participants in the labour force have an up-to-date frame of reference in relation to the economic and labour market context in Ireland and where future career opportunities are likely to arise. It is crucial that this information is available to participants at times of key career decisions.

It is not possible to predict the long term or even the medium term future precisely and the associated demand for skills. Developments in IT for example, over the past two decades have seen new occupations and specialisms rise and decline at a rapid pace. But this does not mean that we should not try to the extent possible to provide guidance on broad trends. Those making career decisions should be able to do so, on the basis of the best available data on current occupational and sectoral employment and projected future trends. Much information is already available on current skills shortages within the economy and where future opportunities may arise. Much information is also available on the workplace and on occupational profiles. Making available such information in a user friendly manner is the central theme of this report.

It is reassuring to find from the research undertaken that there is already a considerable amount of valuable and up to date information available in Ireland on various national websites. The report also highlights the demand for this information amongst users. The challenge is to improve the access route to this information in a way which is geared to respond to the requirements of the full spectrum of differing potential users. This report recommends that this will best be achieved through electronic means, by creating a national portal, leading to the full range of material that potential users may require.

In addition to an electronic solution, there is a need for a well-coordinated career guidance support system, geared to meet the full spectrum of needs of a variety of potential users. Career guidance professionals are the primary intermediary through which many users receive guidance. Guidance professionals are reluctant to promote particular occupational areas on the basis of national need because of understandable concerns about the accuracy of forecasts and the need to provide guidance within the framework of clients' personal preferences. The objective should be to provide timely, relevant, up-to-date information and allow users to make their own choices. The research shows that, while individuals may not make positive decisions in relation to rapidly expanded occupations and sectors, they may be dissuaded from entering careers in sectors shown to be in decline. Guidance professionals need support in accessing and understanding this information themselves.

I would ask the National Guidance Forum to consider this report in the context of its work and I ask that the Departments of Enterprise Trade and Employment and Education and Science consider its recommendations in the context of their joint work on developing a National Learning Line.

I would like to thank Siobhan Phillips and her colleagues for the research undertaken for this study. I would also like to thank the members of the Steering Group who guided the work and the Secretariat for their input into the production of the report.



Anne Heraty
Chairperson

Expert Group on Future Skills Needs

Contents

	Foreword by Ms Anne Heraty, Chairperson, Expert Group on Future Skills Needs	(i)
	List of Contents	(ii)
	List of Tables and Figures	(iii)
	<i>Executive Summary</i>	<i>1</i>
1	<i>Introduction</i>	<i>8</i>
2	<i>Methodology</i>	<i>10</i>
3	<i>Overview of National Guidance Services</i>	<i>13</i>
4	<i>Results</i>	<i>20</i>
5	<i>Discussion and Conclusions</i>	<i>38</i>
6	<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>43</i>
	Appendix 1: Matrix Analysis of Careers Information Resources including Electronic, Non-electronic and Self-Assessment Resources	46
	Appendix 2: References	55
	Appendix 3: Members of the Steering Group	56
	Appendix 4: EGFSN Members	56
	Appendix 5: EGFSN Publications	57
	Appendix 6: List of Contributors	58

List of Tables and Figures

Table 1:	Key Influences on Career	22
Table 2:	Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources – General Careers Information	23
Figure 4.1:	Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources – General Careers Information	23
Table 3:	Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources – Agencies/Providers	23
Figure 4.2:	Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources – Agencies/Providers	24
Table 4:	Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources – Labour Market and Economic Information	24
Figure 4.3:	Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources – Labour Market and Economic Information	24
Table 5:	Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources by User Groups	25
Figure 4.4:	Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources by User Groups	25
Table 6:	Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources – Careers Information Databases and Assessment Tools	25
Figure 4.5:	Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources – Careers Information Databases and Assessment Tools	26
Table 7:	Most Helpful and ‘Easiest to Use’ Forms of Support	27
Figure 4.6:	Most Helpful and ‘Easiest to Use’ Forms of Support	27
Table 8:	Access to Internet at Home by User Group	28
Figure 4.7:	Access to Internet at Home by User Group	28
Table 9:	The Preferences of Different User Groups for Different Support Arrangements	29
Figure 4.8:	The Preferences of Different User Groups for Different Support Arrangements	29

1. Executive Summary

Introduction

This report examines awareness of, use and preferences in respect of labour market and careers information. This data is complemented by an examination and analysis of Irish electronic and non-electronic sources of careers and labour market information. Policy issues that arise in the literature are discussed and implications for the improved presentation and dissemination of careers information are examined. The overall purpose of the research is to help the Expert Group On Future Skills Needs (‘the Group’) ensure that career guidance professionals and users of careers information in Ireland have a clearly defined and up-to-date reference within which to make career decisions or provide careers advice. In particular, the Group is concerned that relevant labour market information should form an intrinsic part of careers information.

In recent years, various commentators have emphasised that Ireland’s objective of becoming a knowledge-based economy is reliant on its willingness to make a serious commitment to lifelong education and training. By extension it must also be reliant on the availability of lifelong careers information and guidance.

In 2002¹, the OECD reported that, in moving closer to a lifelong approach to the provision of career information, guidance and counselling services, Ireland had many strengths. However it needs to build an improved information base to help steer the development of these services and sharpen the focus on careers. It also needs to improve co-ordination between the key stakeholders, provide a more diverse approach to delivery that makes wider use of community resources, ICT experience, curriculum delivery and improve adults’ access to career guidance services. It should be noted that improvements in co-ordination have occurred since the OECD report with the establishment of the National Guidance Forum² representing both education and training guidance interests. In addition, the Interdepartmental Committee on Lifelong Learning provides further opportunity for joined-up policy in this area and sharpens the focus on adults and on access to information.

In terms of overcoming identified information overlaps and gaps in dissemination, the OECD made a strong case for Ireland shifting towards electronic delivery as the main vehicle. Other commentators note that problems of fragmentation and duplication are being addressed effectively in a number of countries by creating a gateway or single access point to a number of Internet sub-databases specialising in work, employment, social supports, training and education.

Terms of Reference (ToR)

It is against this background that the Group commissioned this report. Its summarised Terms of Reference were:

1. To establish user preferences in regard to accessing careers information and self-assessment tools.
2. To catalogue the full range and content of careers information and self-assessment tools available in Ireland to all categories of potential users.

¹ OECD (2002), *Review of Career Guidance Policies – Ireland Country Note*. Paris: OECD.

² In 2004, to facilitate collaboration between guidance professionals within the education and training systems and to make availability of lifelong guidance a reality.

3. (a) To assess the extent to which career guidance professionals and other users of careers information are aware of the overall economic context and outlook for Ireland.
- (b) To ascertain how best to disseminate this contextual information within the career guidance profession.
4. To determine the best means of making relevant labour market (supply and demand) analyses by the Group and other relevant sources available to the full spectrum of target user audiences when accessing electronic or other sources of careers information.
5. To identify the most effective means of making careers information and associated self-assessment tools widely available and utilised.
6. To identify and make recommendations on practical improvements that might be made in regard to lifelong careers information and dissemination in Ireland, principally from a user perspective, as in all aspects of the report.

The Group established a Steering Group to oversee the project. (For membership see Appendix 3.)

Methodology

The Terms of Reference were met through a combination of desk and field research incorporating qualitative and quantitative methods. Policy literature and examples of good practice by other countries in mounting careers information electronically were examined. All major sources of Irish careers information and self-assessment tools available electronically (usually via careers information databases such as Careers World, Career Directions, Qualifax, etc) were searched, catalogued and appraised on the basis of 'up to datedness', user friendliness of information, comprehensiveness and relevance.

The range of careers information and self-assessment tools available in Ireland were researched, catalogued and evaluated. To guide the fieldwork, questionnaires and interview schedules were devised, piloted and agreed. A geographically stratified, random sample of schools, Post Leaving Certificate Colleges (PLCs), Institutes of Technology and Universities, and a targeted sample of adults making major career change or development decisions, was selected. Interviews with guidance, education, training, labour market and employer stakeholders were also conducted.

It should be noted that the sample size of over 300 respondents, while larger than many studies of this nature, is not statistically representative of the populations under study. However, the coverage is well balanced in terms of rural-urban mix, as it is in relation to socio-economic profile and gender breakdown. The statistical results are complemented by consultations with a wide range of specialist interests and focus group discussions, and are also informed by the matrix analysis, making for a well-rounded research design. In addition, the combination of a high response rate, together with the fact that the results are very consistent across groups, allows the trends and issues that arise to be regarded with some confidence.

The objective of the study was primarily to focus on careers information and its dissemination. While there was no intention to address issues relating to the provision of career guidance *per se*, the inextricable link between information and guidance, together with respondents' inclination to discuss guidance, led to identification of the overall career guidance needs of respondents forming an essential part of the findings and conclusions of this report. In so doing, it is intended only that they might provide some helpful indications for other bodies addressing the issues concerned.

Results of Field Research – Awareness and Use of Different Resources

Awareness of various careers databases is very poor³, with between 38% and 72% of respondents reporting that they never heard of four of the major Irish careers databases. Usage rates are also low.

Awareness and use of formal labour market information amongst respondents is generally poor, but usage varies across groups, with adults being twice as likely as third level students, who in turn are twice as likely as school students to use such information. Awareness of formal labour market information by guidance professionals is good but usage levels are low because the information is not adapted to the guidance context.

Respondents' preferences were to research their own career choices in the first instance, followed by personal support from family and friends.

Respondents found guidance counsellors, followed by work experience, to be the most helpful source of careers information and Internet databases, followed by guidance counsellors, to be the 'easiest to use'.

It can be gleaned from this and focus group feedback that, typically, people conduct some preliminary research on career issues, explore options with friends and family and ideally engage with guidance counsellors at the point of decision making. While they appear to prefer personal research to guided support, in practice it seems that guidance counselling is the most helpful.

Not surprisingly then, respondents showed a preference for one to one guidance sessions to group sessions. They also showed a preference for a variety of guidance services over 'one stop shop' provision.

User Group Needs

School students require detailed and objective information about courses, jobs and career prospects by way of much more detailed prospectuses than those available and more contact through seminars and informal events with companies, recent job holders and students.

Third level students need guidance services to take a much more imaginative approach to careers advice. Respondents considered that company information and contact is skewed in the direction of large corporate players and there is little information about or contact with SMEs or the not for profit sector. Careers advice was also said to be overly general and the desirability of faculty-based services in the third level sector was raised in this regard.

Adult needs vary greatly, depending on their educational and life experiences. *'High fliers'* are well capable of meeting most of their own information needs and are active users of labour market information produced by the Group. They find information on intra-company policies and practices more difficult to locate and would like the employer bodies to develop a directory of Irish companies, which includes detail in training, promotional and work-life balance policies.

Women returners' information needs are secondary to their need for part-time course provision, which takes account of the primary school timetable and their financial circumstances. Uptake of part-time courses by low-income earners is constrained by the ineligibility of part-time courses for VTOS funding. An increasing number of part-time courses are funded under the Back to Education Initiative of the Further Education Section which provides welcome opportunities for adults to combine a return to learning with family, work and other responsibilities. However, those who do not satisfy social welfare criteria may not qualify for funding or the continuation of allowances and may also have to pay reduced or full fees.

The best means of disseminating careers information to parents is via the schools network initially. Their contact and comfort level with other institutions is low. Many of the women returners interviewed had poor early experiences of education. Their preference is for personal development courses delivered in the

³A description and website address for all major careers websites is provided in the matrix in Appendix 1.

community to help them build their confidence about re-entering education, training or the workforce and for adult guidance services to be available to support them in this journey.

Individuals with redundancy experience also voiced a need for adult guidance services. Private recruitment firms were found to be excellent by those with skills in high demand but poor for those who did not. FÁS was also found to be excellent for those with a technical background but not suited to those with more general business or professional backgrounds.

Adults involved in re-training made the point that their return to education was only brought about through a high level of guidance type support. They were strongly of the view that information in itself is not the issue; what is needed is active dissemination of available information, together with person centred support at major career change junctures.

Geographically isolated adults, like the women returners, had primary needs that have to be mediated before effective interaction with careers information can take place. Lack of access to the Internet, libraries and lack of transport or finance to engage in mainstream training means that many of these adults are trapped in low skill low pay jobs, for which there is increasing competition. A strong need for outreached, local training and career guidance support was identified by this group.

For the *Youthreach group*, and others who may have left education prematurely, the form of information presentation is very important. Staff support and help with mediating Internet information is also needed. Where possible, information should be presented visually. This group also needed guidance support in helping them choose appropriate courses, before rather than after signing up for Youthreach.

Results of Matrix Analysis of Irish Careers Information

A matrix of the principal sources of Irish careers information, including self-assessment tools, was researched, catalogued and evaluated for this study. Appraisal criteria included 'up to datedness', user friendliness of information, comprehensiveness, relevance and overlap.

The main finding from this analysis was that Ireland is well supplied in terms of the content and availability of careers information. That said, labour market information tends to be incidental to course and careers information rather than a third supporting pillar. Another design issue is that Irish sites are generally not strongly oriented to mature entrants or returners.

Furthermore, the number of careers databases means that there is some duplication, particularly with regard to occupational A-Z information. Many sites are also heavily text based and would be enhanced by the use of more visual and interactive material. In terms of gaps, most of the major careers databases do not have structured, well sign-posted labour market information sources on site.

Conclusions

While there is great interest in formal labour market information, its style of presentation means that at present it is accessible mainly to policy and academic audiences. This information needs to be made more user friendly and understandable to a wider audience, while remaining factual.

Career guidance professionals need information that is adaptable for use with students of different ages and levels of comprehension. As such, it needs to be highly summarised and visually presented where possible. The more academic and detailed information should, however, also be available.

There is a huge lack of awareness of available career database resources across all user groups and a need for a more centralised and easily publicised single access point to all careers and labour market

information. The main conclusion from the research is that Ireland should move to a single portal/gateway site, which would be fully resourced in terms of course, labour market, careers and organisational/company information.

It would also contain or provide comprehensive links to a range of supporting information including assessment tools, back up guidance resources, CV builder software, career chat rooms and testimonials. Where appropriate, information would be interactive and visual in style. Superb design of the portal is critical to its accessibility and usability and international examples of good practice should be carefully studied before undertaking this venture.

There is clear need and demand for a lifelong guidance service, to include careers information, for those negotiating major career or skill need changes, impending job loss or return to work after long absences.

Options include a widely available register of accredited practitioners, development and better co-ordination of existing adult guidance resources in the education and training system and the development of a voucher system providing purchasing power to users. It is unlikely that a one-stop shop type approach would meet all needs. There is potential for developing private markets for professional and high skills groups. However, there is also a strong rationale for publicly supported outreach services to those who are educationally, geographically or economically marginalised.

A more structured approach to the management and delivery of work experience at second and third level might usefully be explored so as to ensure more equitable distribution of its benefits. The development of more formal partnerships with industry bodies is also worthy of exploration in this regard and may open pathways to providing more contact between industry and those in education, as is desired.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Development of a Portal

The Departments of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and Education and Science should explore the feasibility of developing a central Irish careers portal or co-ordinated gateway site.

This would contain careers, course and labour market information, organisational/company profiles, a range of assessment tools and testimonials, a guidance helpline and appropriate linkages to related sites. In addition to school and third level user groups, this site should be clearly targeted at other less typical user groups at different stages in the careers continuum, including those who:

- Were recently laid off;
- Are about to be made redundant;
- Wish to return to school;
- Wish to change career;
- Are older workers;
- Have been absent from the workforce for a long period;
- Wish to become self-employed.

Clearly defined ownership of the development and subsequent management needs of the portal is critical, to ensure that the superb design of the portal, essential if it is to guarantee its accessibility and usability, is established and maintained. Examples of international good practice should be closely studied and possibly emulated in trying to progress such a project.

A significant amount of valuable information on various aspects of careers information and related tools and topics is currently available on a number of websites and other sources within the Irish education and labour market sectors. The following are particularly useful examples which could be incorporated into an eventual portal:

- The National Council for Guidance in Education has compiled the Irish section of the PLOTEUS⁴ European portal;
- The publication of the first National Skills Bulletin, to be repeated on an annual basis, would, with some adjustment, accord with how labour market information should be presented on an Irish Portal;
- A substantial amount of work is already underway in developing Qualifax to become a central course information site. Recent improvements in its self-assessment facilities are promising;
- The Oasis site developed for government by Comhairle, providing front line information on government services, is accessible and comprehensive and would provide the needed links to information on welfare and other civic issues;
- Business Access to State Information & Services (Basis) provides a single access point on all government services for businesses, thus addressing the needs of those interested in self-employment;
- Community exchange provides information on available jobs in community and voluntary organisations in Ireland.

It may be possible to develop one of the existing careers databases into a portal, thus avoiding further duplication and unnecessary expenditure. A technical examination of the four main career/course databases would be necessary before any major decisions could be made in this regard. What needs to be done is an estimation of the design and content journey of careers sites currently, to what an eventual portal along the lines of a Canadian model, described elsewhere in this report, would be. The feasibility and cost of developing either an existing site or a new site from first principles can then be fully explored.

Whichever site is to become the vehicle for Ireland's careers portal, serious consideration should be given to the name, to reflect the broad careers remit and to facilitate ease of search engine recognition.

Recommendation 2: Promotion of Existing Career Sites

The lack of advertising of career sites has had a negative impact on their use. Their existence (Qualifax, Career Directions, Grad Ireland etc) should be widely promoted to all potential users in the media.

All guidance professionals should be advised to introduce students and FÁS clients to these sites during contact hours. If a national portal is to be established, a high impact publicity plan should be developed from the outset.

Recommendation 3: Improving Access to Useful Labour Market Information

Both the availability and accessibility of labour market information should be improved on careers databases.

The Group should take overall responsibility for advising and monitoring progress on this recommendation and consult with appropriate parties in doing so. The availability of labour market information should be articulated on the home page of careers databases or an eventual portal. Information should be understandable by the widest possible range of target groups and as such should be readable,

⁴Portal on Learning Opportunities Throughout the European Space, which provides information on studying, training and living in Ireland or any other EU, EEA or pre-accession country.

highly summarised and visually presented where possible. More academic and detailed labour market information should also be available for those who wish to conduct research or wish to be further informed.

Recommendation 4: Improving Existing Career Guidance and Information Resources

The bodies with overall responsibility for guidance, namely the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment should collaborate to progress the following recommendations through or in consultation with the appropriate agencies and professional associations.

A wider range of reputable self-assessment tools, including CV builders, should either be made available directly on Irish careers sites or through appropriate linkages.

The best use and limitations of these tools should be highlighted. The availability of more sophisticated and individualised instruments should be signalled, as should the availability of professional guidance and occupational psychology services. In this regard the various guidance interests should examine the possibility of establishing a register of accredited practitioners.

The Departments should ask guidance bodies (Institute of Guidance Counsellors, the Association of Graduate Careers Services in Ireland, the Institute of Technology Careers Advisory Network and FÁS Employment Services) to examine how best to communicate the demand from all groups for informal information delivered by recent job holders and students about day-to-day work and course experiences. Practical recommendations as to how this might be brought about include online discussion fora and through developing links with employer bodies, companies, employees and ex-students.

There are good practice examples of work placement in existence in Ireland and these might usefully be sought out as models. Work experience is seen by those surveyed as a way of gaining valuable information about the nature of different types of jobs and careers, at both second and third level. The possibility of industry/other work organisations becoming more formally involved in managing and structuring third level work placement programmes might usefully be explored by the relevant industry/organisational bodies⁵, guidance bodies⁶, the Council of Heads of Irish Universities and the Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology. The Department of Education and Science is best placed to take the lead role in advancing this. As part of this process, the relevant parties might examine how third level guidance practitioners could be supported to provide information on and contact with a wider range of companies and non-profit organisations to students.

There is a need for institutions to continually review their prospectuses and course information to provide maximum relevant information for prospective students. Institutions should benchmark themselves against best international practice.

The Departments of Education and Science, Social and Family Affairs and Enterprise, Trade and Employment should examine how careers information, in the context of existing adult guidance services, might be adapted or extended to meet the needs of those who are not currently attached to the education or training system. Such groups would include those who are unemployed, under-employed, facing possible redundancy or absent from the work force for long periods because of caring responsibilities.

⁵ IBEC, CCI, Public Jobs, SFA and a community and voluntary sector representative e.g. the Wheel.

⁶ The Association of Graduate Careers Services in Ireland and the Institute of Technology Careers Advisory Network.

1. Introduction

Ireland's objective of becoming a leading knowledge-based economy relies to some extent on its success in turning lifelong learning into more than a policy aspiration. This means that the labour force will need to upgrade, update and adapt its knowledge and skills faster than ever before and more frequently over the course of workers' lifespan. In order for this to happen we need good 'cradle to the grave' training and educational infrastructure, together with equitable access policies. Arguably these need to be strongly counterbalanced by lifelong career information and guidance in order that individuals can be assisted to reach decisions about the steps they might take at different junctures in their working lives, to raise their skills and adapt to change. An integral element of such decision-making is the availability of good information on where future opportunities are likely to present themselves in the labour market.

In 2002, the OECD conducted an examination of career guidance in Ireland⁷ and concluded that, in moving closer to a lifelong approach, Ireland has many strengths including its strong legislative basis, a climate that favours initiative and experimentation and a committed guidance profession who generally provide well-received services. It drew attention to a need to improve co-ordination between key guidance stakeholders.

Since the OECD report was published, a number of important developments have taken place to address co-ordination concerns, including the establishment of the National Guidance Forum representing both education and training guidance interests.

In addition, the Interdepartmental Committee on Lifelong Learning was established in 2003 to implement the recommendations of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning. The Steering Committee brings together representatives of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Finance and the Department of the Taoiseach.

One of the central recommendations made by the OECD is the development of an improved information base. This would help steer the development of services, improve co-ordination between the key stakeholders, and encourage a more diverse approach to delivery that makes wider use of community resources, ICT experience, and curriculum delivery. The OECD also suggested ways in which resources might better be targeted to improve adults' access to services and to sharpen the use of guidance resources in schools.

It is against this background that the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs ('the Group') commissioned a report on Careers and Labour Market Information in Ireland. The research was conducted between September and December 2005.

1.1 Aim and Terms of Reference

The aim of this study was to help the Group to ensure that career guidance professionals and users of careers information in Ireland have a clearly defined and up-to-date reference within which to make career decisions or provide careers advice. In particular, the Group is concerned that relevant labour market information should form an intrinsic part of careers information. The associated Terms of Reference were:

1. To establish user preferences in regard to accessing careers information and self-assessment tools and ways in which these preferences might be reflected in their provision. Due regard should be given to the different categories of primary user, namely school and PLC students, third level students and graduates or employees seeking employment or progressing (vertically or horizontally) into different career areas.

⁷OECD (2002), *Review of Career Guidance Policies – Ireland Country Note*. Paris: OECD.

2. To catalogue the full range and content of careers information and self-assessment tools available in Ireland to all categories of potential users and assess the extent to which this information is relevant, timely and user friendly while also assessing any replication that might exist and its implications.
3. (a) To assess the extent to which career guidance professionals and other users of careers information are aware of the overall economic context and outlook for Ireland, including projected skill needs and gaps in different sectors and occupations.

(b) To ascertain how best to disseminate this contextual information within the career guidance profession.
4. Based on the analysis of 1 and 3 above, determine the best means of making relevant labour market (supply and demand) analyses by the Group and other relevant sources available to the full spectrum of target user audiences when accessing electronic or other sources of careers information.
5. To identify the most effective means of making careers information and associated self-assessment tools widely available and utilised.
6. To identify and make recommendations on practical improvements that might be made in regard to lifelong careers information and dissemination in Ireland, principally from a user perspective, as in all aspects of the report.

The Group established a Steering Group to oversee the project.

Chapter 2 details the methodology taken in meeting the Terms of Reference.

2. Methodology

The methodology can be divided into desk and field research strands, which are described below.

2.1 Desk Research

Desk research was largely concerned with conducting literature and electronic searches to identify reliable sources of Irish careers information. A review of documentation relating to lifelong career guidance was conducted. This included relevant policy documents, previous reviews and reports e.g. relevant OECD reports, skills forecasting and other relevant careers research conducted by or for the Expert Group for Future Skills Needs, the National Centre for Guidance in Education, the National Guidance Forum, Report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning and others.

International careers information portals and sites that were highlighted as examples of good practice by members of the Steering Group and career guidance contacts were also examined for comparison purposes. In this regard, sites developed in the UK, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and the EU were examined. This information, together with non-electronic sources of careers information, is presented in matrix format.

2.2 Fieldwork

Primary research was necessary to meet the requirements of Terms 1 and 3 of this study. Given the size and range of potential user groups identified, it was agreed that the project would target those actively involved in making career development or career change decisions.

A random, geographically stratified sample of schools (three post primary and three post-leaving certificate), three Institutes of Technology, three Universities and a Youthreach centre were selected, written to and invited to take part in the study. Guidance counsellors and careers advisors in each institution were also invited to take part in the study. Five cameo groups of ten adults were identified who were likely to have recent experience or need of careers information. These groups were:

- Women returners from Ballyfermot in Dublin engaged in a community education project;
- Middle managers from the drinks and food industries who have experienced redundancy;
- Skilled crafts workers from Waterford from a sector undergoing restructuring and engaged in re-training;
- 'High fliers' with backgrounds in business, engineering, telecoms, IT, law and accountancy;
- Geographically isolated adults in an area (South West Donegal) undergoing decline in traditional manufacturing and engaged mainly in occasional work.

While unemployed persons were not specifically targeted, many of those from the 'redundancy experience', 'geographically isolated' and 'women returner' groups had experienced short and long term unemployment.

A questionnaire, focus group and structured interview schedule were designed for the fieldwork.

2.3 Questionnaire Design and Administration

The questionnaire was piloted on a small group of school students and adjustments were made on the basis of their feedback. It was then circulated to the Steering Group, with a suggested outline for the focus groups and guidance interviews, and finalised after the suggested improvements. In the case of the student groups and the Waterford and Ballyfermot groups of adults, the questionnaire was introduced and administered before engaging in a focus group discussion, and on a one to one basis with other adult participants.

The questionnaire captured information on the demographics of participants/different user groups and provided rating scales on a number of relevant career guidance related statements. It examined awareness and usage levels of different groups with different forms of careers information and other resources including self-assessment and careers research tools. The questionnaire also addressed respondents' preferences in terms of information and resource options.

2.4 Focus Groups and Interviews

The focus groups and interviews with users concentrated on qualitative and discursive matters raised by the Terms of Reference and relevant literature including:

- Career and labour market information needs of different groups (those in education/training, at work, and job seekers) and at different stages of the life cycle;
- Views on the quality and relevance of labour market information (supply and demand side) provided by different careers services and/or products;
- Perception of how well careers and labour market information is promoted to different groups;
- Preferred methods for accessing careers information from supply and demand perspectives;
- Views on how well careers information and practice are linked with user needs at different stages of their life and career cycle;
- Perceptions/experience of the quality, accessibility and usefulness of different careers information products and assessment tools;
- Views on careers service provided by different institutions in Ireland and identification of gaps or unnecessary duplication;
- Identification of improvements or necessary changes to current situation.

Consultations with the following policy makers, service providers and other stakeholders were conducted on a face-to-face basis wherever feasible:

- Cement Roadstone Holdings;
- Department of Education and Science (Higher Education and Further Education Sections);
- FÁS (Skills and Labour Market Research Unit and Employment Services);
- Forfás;
- Discover Science and Engineering;
- Higher Education Authority;
- IBEC;
- Institute of Guidance Counsellors;
- National Centre for Guidance in Education;
- Association of Graduate Careers Services in Ireland.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature and covered the following areas:

- Profile/role and responsibilities of organisation in career guidance area;
- Awareness of the overall economic context and outlook for Ireland amongst practitioners;
- Views on the quality and relevance of labour market information (supply and demand side) provided by different careers services and/or products;
- Awareness of projected skill needs and gaps in different sectors and occupations;
- Effective promotion and dissemination strategies;
- Perceived gaps and overlaps in career guidance resources and provision;
- Developmental and support needs of career guidance professionals;
- Recommendations for the future.

2.5 Analysis

The completed questionnaires were input to the SPSS programme and statistically analysed. A number of distribution, frequency and cross tabulation statistics were performed to allow trends and comparisons be established. The responses to open questions were recorded verbatim into a separate Word file.

A form of content analysis was applied to the qualitative interview and focus group material and themes were extracted accordingly. The focus of both the statistical and content analysis was on addressing the objectives laid out in the Terms of Reference.

2.6 Methodological Issues

It is important to point out that the sample is not statistically representative of the populations under study. The end sample contains over 300 respondents, some 80% of whom are second or third level students under 25 years of age. Inevitably, this has a bearing on the preferences and needs identified. Having said that, the coverage is well balanced in terms of rural-urban mix, as it is in relation to socio-economic profile and gender breakdown. In addition, the combination of a high response rate brought about by the practice of administering questionnaires in situ, together with the fact that the results are very consistent across groups, allows the trends and issues that arise to be regarded with confidence. It should also be noted that the size of the Youthreach group is too small for statistical purposes. However, because it is important to have a sense of distinct issues, this group has not been aggregated into the larger adult group. Reported Youthreach results should therefore be viewed with caution as regards wider generalisation.

The objective of the study was primarily to focus on careers information and its dissemination and on the need for this to include relevant labour market information. While there was no intention to address issues relating to the provision of career guidance per se, the inextricable link between information and guidance together with respondents' inclination to discuss guidance, led to the career guidance needs of respondents forming an essential part of the findings and conclusions of this report.

Finally, the timing of the fieldwork (October 2005) may have had some impact, as guidance counsellors had yet to interact in some locations with some groups.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of National Guidance Services.

3. Overview of National Guidance Services

This overview is included to provide context for the examination of careers information and dissemination issues. Participation in education at second and third level in Ireland is high by OECD standards, as is the number of pathways from second to third level (OECD, 2002 op. cit). The OECD notes that the benefits of a thriving economy and good labour market opportunities are easily available to an increasingly well-educated population but that significant areas of disadvantage remain in the form of higher than average illiteracy rates and pockets of long-term unemployment. In addition, participation in adult and continuing education is low by OECD standards, which recent policy in the further education and guidance area has sought to address.

3.1 Role of Guidance Counsellors

A core principle in codes of practice for career guidance services is the primacy of the individual:

'Their role is not to determine what individuals should do, but to ensure that their decisions are well-informed (in terms of, among other things, the needs of the labour market) and well thought through' (Sultana 2004⁸, P31).

According to Sultana there are practical and ethical reasons why this focus is important. Guidance services can only serve the public good if they retain the confidence and trust of the individuals they serve. In his view, there should be a clear understanding between policy-makers and practitioners on this issue, allowing for much greater collaboration.

Ireland's guidance counselling services are strongly linked to publicly funded education and training provision in schools (second and post leaving certificate levels), third level institutions and FÁS training centres. There are no formal guidance or career learning inputs at primary school level. Recently, adult guidance has been made available to adults engaged in literacy, VTOS and community education programmes. Other youth and adult guidance initiatives, funded under various pilot, voluntary and community schemes also exist in the non-formal and informal sectors.

3.1.1 Guidance Infrastructure

Guidance professionals are supported by a well developed, dualistic infrastructure for service delivery. The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) operates under the Department of Education and Science (DES) and provides training and information for those attached to educational facilities. The National Resource Centre for Vocational Guidance helps provide a European dimension to the FÁS guidance service.

NCGE is a member of the EUROGUIDANCE Network of National Resource Centres for Guidance, which aims to promote mobility through the provision of quality and best practice guidance information. The EUROGUIDANCE site provides a gateway to the services of the EUROGUIDANCE centre in each of the EU, EEA, and pre-accession countries.

There are two EUROGUIDANCE centres in Ireland, NCGE <http://www.ncge.ie> with responsibility for the education sector and EUROGUIDANCE at FÁS with responsibility for the labour market and training sector <http://www.fasnrcvg.ie>

Euroguidance at NCGE is responsible for the compilation and updating of the Irish section of PLOTEUS (Portal on Learning Opportunities Throughout the European Space) an initiative of the European Commission which provides information on studying, training and living in Ireland or any other EU, EEA or pre-accession country. The PLOTEUS site operates as a gateway to a number of education, training and

⁸ Sultana, R. (2004), Guidance Policies in the Knowledge Society. Trends, Challenges and Responses Across Europe. A Cedefop Synthesis Report. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.

other sites that provide information of relevance to those wishing to study or work abroad (e.g. cost of living, tuition fees, finding accommodation, legal framework etc.).

The National Guidance Forum was established in 2004 as a joint initiative of the Department of Education and Science (DES) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. Its aim is to facilitate collaboration between guidance providers and to make the availability of lifelong guidance a reality. The main rationale for its establishment is to improve co-ordination between the education and training systems – one of the weaknesses identified in the OECD report. To this end the Forum is examining and will make recommendations on the seamless delivery of guidance across the education and labour market sectors. The work of the Forum is informed by international and national research and policy in guidance.

3.2 Guidance in Post Primary Schools

In the post primary schools sector, guidance is an entitlement under the provisions of the Education Act 1998. Up to May 2005 the Department of Education and Science funded one guidance counselling post per 500 students. Smaller schools are provided with guidance hours on a pro-rata basis. In May 2005 DES announced new provisions in relation to the provision of guidance which linked the hours provided to the number of students enrolled. Guidance also forms part of the curricula for the Transition Year Programme (TYP), the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programmes (LCVP).

Guidance at school level (both second and post leaving certificate levels) is not a focused careers service. At the discretion of school Principals, guidance counsellors divide their time between careers work and personal counselling which they may also need to balance with teaching curricular subjects.

3.3 Guidance at Third Level

All third level colleges and universities provide career guidance services, which are separate and distinct from counselling services.

Provision is largely concentrated on final year students and recent graduates. However, some career services have started to provide careers education in the curriculum of undergraduate courses. The ratios and qualification levels of guidance professionals is largely a matter for the institutions themselves and there is considerable variation in staffing and resources. Generally, guidance staff student ratios are much lower than is the case at second level. In the case of Institutes of Technology, for example there is an average of one full-time career guidance post per college.

3.4 Adult Guidance

FÁS, through its employment placement and training services, is strongly involved in providing guidance services to its primary client groups, namely adult job seekers, apprentices and people with disabilities.

Its guidance service is not restricted to these groups – any adult (other than asylum seekers) can book an interview with a FÁS careers advisor. Recent policy changes have meant the extension of services to employees seeking internal careers development or progression opportunities, although the implementation details and practicalities of such an arrangement have yet to be worked out. So, while FÁS guidance services are technically available to all adults, a more intensive guidance service engagement is reserved for those with greatest need i.e. the target groups outlined above.

Careers guidance in FÁS is under the remit of Employment Services, which comprises mainstream FÁS employment services available regionally and in major population centres and the Local Employment Service (LES), which is sharply focussed on areas experiencing persistent unemployment. As such, the LES

service is more intensive, personalised and remedial in nature. Thus mainstream employment service guidance staff are typically involved in providing short-term careers/jobs information and advice, whereas LES frontline staff are usually involved in providing more long term case-managed forms of support including needs assessment, in-depth guidance, counselling and employer mediation services as necessary.

The White Paper on Adult Education, "Learning for Life", published in 2000, set out proposals for the development of an Adult Educational Guidance Initiative (AEGI). The objective of the initiative was to provide guidance for adults in VTOS, literacy and community education programmes.

The initiative commenced in 1999, and was expanded subsequently in three phases. There are currently 35 guidance projects. The initiative is funded by the Department of Education and Science, under the National Development Plan 2000-2006, and operates under the aegis of the National Centre for Guidance in Education. It is delivered locally by VECs in the main. The AEGI service offers information, advice and guidance on an individual and group basis to participants in the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme, the adult literacy service and community education in order to assist them to make the best choices for learning.

3.5 Policy Issues Identified in the Literature

While the OECD's review of Ireland's guidance provision is generally favorable, both it and other researchers raise a number of pertinent issues, many of which have been raised by those consulted in the course of this research.

Some of the key issues highlighted by the OECD and other researchers are outlined below.

3.5.1 *Imbalances of Provision within Schools*

Despite good overall levels of provision, imbalances between junior and senior cycle school guidance inputs have been reported in the literature. An audit in 2000 (NCGE⁹) found that in over 60% of schools, 20% or less of guidance time is spent with junior cycle students and in approximately 25% of schools, no guidance time was spent with these students. One of the reasons for this imbalance is the almost complete lack of guidance materials and funding for the junior cycle. The Institute of Guidance Counsellors is preparing some material to fill this gap but it will not be available for some three years.

In the view of the OECD, the development of curriculum-based careers modules for all second level students (similar to those provided under the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme) would reduce the pressure for one-to one sessions with students and allow guidance counsellors respond more to those with greatest needs.

3.5.2 *Adult Access*

In terms of development areas, the OECD found significant gaps in adults' access to career guidance, and indications that demand exceeds the supply of services. In particular, it found that services are more limited for the employed, those in small and medium-sized enterprises, and those not in the labour market or not entitled to social security assistance.

3.5.3 *Clarity and Availability of Information*

A key recommendation contained in the Report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning was that Ireland needs an integrated source of information and advice on education and training opportunities. This source should also cover job-related labour market information on requirements and qualification routes to different careers, areas of job growth and development.

⁹ National Centre for Guidance in Education, 2000.

The National Guidance Forum is advising a DES/DETE Working Group on how best to make such careers information available for citizens. In their ongoing development of plans for a national learning line, the Departments will be taking account of existing information systems. It is hoped that this report will assist in such decision-making.

3.5.4 *Overlaps and Co-ordination*

The OECD highlighted a need for a more integrated and co-ordinated approach to careers information in Ireland both electronically and institutionally. The need for more co-ordination between labour market and education information is not unique to Ireland. A paper commissioned by CEDEFOP¹⁰ found that:

'There is a need for strong 'cross-pathing' between educational and occupational information – showing, for example, the occupational implications of educational decisions, and the educational pathways that lead to particular occupational destinations. This requires close collaboration between education and labour authorities'.

While more progress on this front is needed, a start has been made by establishing the aforementioned National Guidance Forum, bringing together key educational and labour market interests and through the joint approach of the skills research and education interests on the Group and various other fora linking mutually supportive information and resources. The Skills and Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) is in the process of putting data available on occupations from the National Skills Bulletin onto its website and linking the occupations in Career Directions to the labour market information from the National Skills Bulletin¹¹. Currently career guidance professionals are being consulted on the type of data that should be on this site. Work currently in hand between Qualifax and FÁS will also help solve gaps between education and occupational information available on sites.

In terms of electronic products, the OECD comments on the evident duplication across the three main databases (Qualifax, Career Directions and Careers world)¹² as well as gaps in coverage (on SMEs for example). While acknowledging the merit of paper-based products and their popularity with young people, it makes a strong case for progressively shifting towards electronic delivery as the main vehicle. Benefits cited include ease of linkage between occupational, labour market, training and educational information, and with self-assessment tools. Central electronic delivery also provides the opportunity for job vacancy data, grants and social welfare entitlements to be incorporated into a single system.

3.5.5 *Modes of Delivery*

The need for more innovative and diverse delivery methods to widen access to career guidance on a more cost-effective basis was highlighted by the OECD report. Such methods can include: group guidance; self-help techniques; the use of community members to deliver parts of programmes; the creation of open access resource centres; the wider use of support staff; outreach methods and appropriate, integrated use of ICT resources.

3.5.6 *Computer Based Guidance*

The section that follows relies heavily on an article by Plant (2002).¹³ Of the sources examined, his ideas on computerisation tie in strongly with what respondents are looking for, what the OECD recommended and different governments/EU authorities are developing in terms of a single entry point resource. His views on assessment also articulate well the concerns of many psychologists and other critics of the 'testing/assessment industry'.

¹⁰ A conference on 'Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap' organised by OECD and the Canadian Government in collaboration with the European Commission, the World Bank and the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance, held in Toronto, Canada, on 6-8 October 2003.

¹¹ The SLMRU website will also provide sector and broad occupational level labour market information such as is included in Chapters 2 and 3 of the National Skills Bulletin.

¹² A description and website address for all major careers websites is provided in the matrix in Appendix 1.

¹³ Plant, P. (2002), *IT in Careers Guidance: Constructs and Learning Computer-Assisted Careers Guidance: Some European Perspectives*. Copenhagen: Danish University of Education.

In examining computer based guidance counselling, Plant notes that problems of fragmentation and duplication are being addressed in some countries by creating a 'gateway' or 'signpost': i.e. a single point of access to a number of Internet sub-databases.

A British Columbia WorkInfoNet online resource that is of interest in the Irish context is 'Making Career Sense of Labour Market Information'¹⁴. This publication introduces career practitioners to key socio-economic and labour market concepts, trends and issues. It also provides practical examples of researching labour market information and using it in the career development process.

Plant stresses that no single massive programme would be appropriate, instead a host of mini programmes, some or all of the above which will be available on the Internet, and each especially designed for specific parts of the counselling process, is preferable. He commends the Dutch system TRAJECT, amongst others, which acknowledge that the sum of the parts can be greater than the individual components and links databases covering occupational, course, and labour market information allowing the user to select a course, discover the related occupations and their details, and ask questions about the employment prospects, including relevant labour market trends and so forth.

'In short, there is already an abundance of programmes, some of them interlinked and some accessible via the Internet, but most are free standing: the challenge is to set them to relevant use (...so that)... counsellors and clients build a consciousness of how, when, and for what they want to make use of computer assistance.'

3.5.7 Trends in Interactivity

Another exciting development heralded by computer and multimedia development is interactivity with obvious applications for a wider range of job seekers and guidance professionals. Plant refers to CD-ROMs from the late 1990s which offered early but sophisticated interactivity as was the case in a number of UK programmes under the common heading 'Adventures into Work': on clicking a picture of a roof in construction, the user was led to a picture and an account of the roofer's work. More recent developments include pacy interactive workplace scenarios and decision-making programmes developed by universities and others for use with different age groups.

3.5.8 Self Assessment Tools Available Electronically

A wide variety of interest inventories are available, ranging from those that measure a small number of relatively broad interests and are self-administered and hand-scored to those that report over 200 scores and must be scored by computers. Some of the widely used (and standardised) metrics based instruments include Self-Directed Search (SDS), the Kuder Occupational Interest Inventory, and Geist Picture Interest Inventory, Career Assessment Inventory (CAI) and the Strong Interest Inventory (SII).

These inventories have limitations, however, which could usefully be brought to the attention of users in the context of offering a range of options. A fundamental weakness pointed out by Plant¹⁵ is that computerisation of older pen-and-pencil based assessment tools, of the 'trait and factor' type underpinning many if not most occupational assessment inventories, are didactic and prescriptive in their approach, no matter how user friendly the human/computer interface might be. In order to fulfil their aim of matching the individual with work possibilities 'out there', the programme must have some very firm messages about the world, which may not be meaningful or valid:

¹⁴ Human Resources Development Canada and the BC Ministry of Education, Training and Technology – with the permission of the copyright owner, the Canadian Career Development Foundation (2001). *Making Career Sense of Labour Market Information* Online Publication <http://makingcareersense.org>

¹⁵ Plant, P. IT in Careers Guidance: Constructs and Learning Computer-Assisted Careers Guidance: Some European Perspectives, 2002. Danish University of Education, Copenhagen.

'In a world of 'flexibility', 'downsizing', and 'portfolio people', in short a most versatile and unpredictable environment (Watts, 1996¹⁶), such firmness is not readily available. Even the personal characteristics, which form the other half of the equation of the matching programmes, are questionable: is a policewoman or -man required to be 'social', 'entrepreneurial' or even 'conventional' these days? Are such stereotypes applicable at all?' (Plant, op cit).

If used appropriately as tools for democratising the availability of careers information, computers can help end 'information monopolies', ease access and be used to develop programmes which help clients construct their own concept of reality with sophisticated decision making support programmes; ideally with a dedicated and empathic counsellor to help the client explore his/her perceived reality.

According to Plant, very few tools for guidance offer this kind of approach with the rare exception of www.careerstorm.com, (formerly licensed to Monster.com) which is based on Personal Construct Theory and includes the use of repertory grids techniques¹⁷.

A constructivist approach calls for varied and flexible support, managed by a sensitive and well-trained counsellor with a variety of different programmes at hand. Depending on the client's perspective, guidance support might include direct access to occupational and educational databases via the Internet; in other cases it might be appropriate to support decision-making or work dilemmas; and in others support might take the form of simulating parts of reality to facilitate trying out different options and their implications.

For Plant, personalisation and the dignity of the individual is central and the approach to assessment should reflect that principle:

'No standard procedure is relevant for all clients: they are different human beings with different requirements, and different personal constructs'.

To summarise, interpretative models that are more individualised/person-centred such as Repertory Grid technique and others like the Myers Briggs Inventory overcome some of the weaknesses of metrics based instruments. However, regardless of the choice of instrument, (assuming standardised models are in use) the quality is largely dependent on the skill and sensitivity of the administrator.

3.5.9 'Marketisation' of Guidance Services

As has been noted, Ireland's guidance provision is publicly provided in the main. Contracting out employment services, including career guidance services, to the profit, non-profit, and community sectors is a feature of provision in many other countries. This can result in cheaper services and, in the case of the voluntary/community sector, in services that are more attuned to the needs of different groups. It can, however, also result in the fragmentation of service delivery. In Canada, for example it is estimated that there are over 10,000 community-based organisations delivering career development services.

Alternatively, a few countries have experimented with voucher schemes, which enable clients to 'buy' the service from a provider of their choice.

¹⁶ Watts, A.G. (1996), *Careerquake*. London: Demos.

¹⁷ For further discussion on this approach see: www.getting-on.co.uk/toolkit/construct.htm and www.enquirewithin.co.nz

Contracts and vouchers can also be linked to pump-priming private markets for career guidance service delivery. There are strong markets in a number of countries in placement agencies and outplacement services but markets for career guidance *per se* are supported largely by contracted-out public employment services and by employers. According to commentators, only in a few countries, notably Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, is there much evidence of a market in career guidance supported by fees paid by individuals themselves, and even here this market is still limited (Watts and Sultana, 2003¹⁸). They point out that it is unclear whether this is a transitional problem, linked to users being accustomed to such services being free of charge, or a systemic problem, based on difficulties in treating career guidance as a commodity in the ways a market would require and that more information is needed on the extent and potential of these markets in all countries.

In Chapter 4, user perspectives on Irish careers information and guidance services are presented.

¹⁸Watts A.G. & Sultana R G (2003) Careers Guidance Policies in 36 countries: *Contrasts and Common Themes*. Paper for the CEDEFOP Conference on Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap, Toronto, Canada, October 2003.

4. Results

In this section, the results of the matrix exercise, statistical analysis and focus group conversations are presented.

4.1 Matrix Analysis of Existing Sources of Careers Information

As outlined in the methodology, a matrix of the principal sources of Irish careers information, including self-assessment tools was researched, catalogued and appraised for this study. The matrix is provided in Appendix 1. Appraisal criteria included 'up to datedness', user friendliness of information, comprehensiveness, relevance and overlap. The main issues that arise are discussed below. Overlaps and gaps are highlighted as relevant.

4.1.1 *Up to Datedness and User Friendliness of Information*

No problems with the up to datedness of information were discovered. This corresponds with the findings of the survey, which also indicates that there are no significant problems in this regard.

Generally, information is user friendly in the sense that it is clear and understandable. That said, many sites¹⁹ and particularly the A-Z occupational listings are very 'text heavy' and would be enhanced by the use of more visual and interactive material. The accessibility of the Qualifax site has recently been improved by way of providing separate screens for different interest and user groups. Mature students or those interested in evening courses can now access that information directly instead of having to trawl through enormous amounts of non-applicable course information.

Many of the self-assessment tools are difficult to apply to a decision-making context. In some cases, the list of career preferences/options that emerge from the test is so broad as to be relatively meaningless. Other tests did not seem to filter information in the manner described.

The Qualifax site will soon have an improved interest inventory available. The Australian government has agreed terms in respect of My Futures Interest Inventory being available on Qualifax. My Future assessment has very good interconnectivity with course information. The pilot was successful and the interest is now available on Qualifax. More generally, interest inventories need be contextualised better with a description of how these instruments can fit with or complement other assessment processes. The limitations of these techniques/instruments should also be pointed out on all websites that display them.

4.1.2 *A-Z, Course and Employer Information*

All of the careers databases contain A-Z indexes of different occupations. The comprehensiveness and relevance of detail varies across sites. Career Directions probably has the most comprehensive and detailed listing. Many sites also contain course information, but as yet no site contains a comprehensive education and training (including apprenticeship) course index. At the time of writing it has been agreed that Qualifax will be expanded to include all FÁS training courses. Employer information generally is confined to the larger players and is more prominent and attractively presented on third level careers websites and GradIreland than on other sites.

4.1.3 *Labour Market – Industry Skill Needs Information*

Most of the major careers databases do not have structured, well sign-posted labour market information sources on site. Most sites do contain labour market information but it is usually incidental to courses or jobs information rather than a centrally designed information feature. As previously noted however (paragraph 3.5.4), work is already underway by the SLMRU to address this information deficit.

¹⁹A description and website address for all major careers websites is provided in the matrix in Appendix 1.

Career Directions probably has the most developed approach to labour market information in the sense that its career descriptions are designed to include sections on skill needs, pay and opportunities. However this information is only provided at the level of individual jobs. A sectoral overview would be useful. Examples of such approaches can be seen on www.prospects.ac.uk, which looks at sectors in terms of where they were, where they are and where they will be. The New Zealand site www.careers.govt.nz has good sectoral analysis and the Australian www.myfuture.edu.au is a model of labour market and future skills information containing pertinent summarised analysis, graphically displayed statistics and comprehensive links to specialist sources of information.

4.1.4 *Self-Assessment Tools*

In terms of the self-help instruments on offer at Irish databases (e.g. Careers Directions and Qualifax), the choice is confined to vocational interest and preference inventories.

The OECD commented on the 'ad hoc' nature of most of these tools, none of which appear to be standardised instruments. Certainly, there is scope to improve the quality and range of techniques on offer by way of the use of referral to more standardised career interest instruments.

There is also scope to improve the range of assessment instruments to include work preference styles, work values and aptitude tests. The existence of more sophisticated and person centred instruments like Myers Briggs and the Repertory Grid Technique could also be signalled.

Self-assessment is more comprehensively provided for by some of the international sites. The Canadian website contains 'quizzes,' a term which clearly indicates that these are not to be confused with professionally administered tests or taken too seriously. The quizzes on offer include an Abilities Quiz; a Data, People, Things Quiz; a Work Preference Quiz (preferences for directive, social, methodical, objective or innovative work) and a Work Values Quiz. Taken together these help users balance their choices on the basis of motivation, interest and ability.

The Australian website uses an interest questionnaire, which provides personalised analysis and rankings under the headings of: Business, People Contact, Scientific, Outdoor, Office, and Practical. Like the Canadian approach, it is part of an assessment framework system which includes items on skills, education knowledge and preferences regarding work conditions and work life balance allowing the user make a balanced assessment of their interests, needs and abilities.

4.1.5 *Curriculum Vitae Information*

None of the Irish websites contains a 'resume builder' and only GradIreland offers advice on how to compile an effective Curriculum Vitae. Again, some of the international websites have good examples that could be modified for the Irish context. For example the Canadian government website provides a facility to allow registered users create and save up to five professional style resumes online (see https://www.jobsetc.ca/toolbox/resume_builder). Layout options are provided and users are brought through cover letter, work history and other relevant sections with a view to compiling an effective CV.

4.1.6 *Inclusiveness*

Irish sites are generally not strongly oriented to mature entrants or returners. In contrast, some of the international sites are explicitly inclusive of such user groups. For example, the Adult Section of the Australian website <http://www.myfuture.edu.au> contains useful sections on 'Returning to work after a long absence' and 'Changing career'. As noted above, the user is provided with a framework to allow them assess their aspirations, interests, education, skills, knowledge, values, work life balance, work conditions and location priorities before exploring different career options. Links to a variety of public and private guidance supports is also provided. This kind of an approach would be very helpful to Irish users who don't fit the school/college leaver profile.

4.2 Results of Statistical Analysis

4.2.1 Demographics

The careers information questionnaire used in this exercise, together with responses, is available on the www.skillsireland.ie website.

The end sample comprised 306 persons in total, of whom 41% were male and 59% female. Fifty nine percent described themselves as living in an urban environment and 41% as living in a rural location. Thirty seven percent were at school, 14% at PLC colleges, 19% at Institutes of Technology, and 10% at university, 3% in Youthreach and some 17% were adults in employment or planning to return. In terms of the age profile, 48% were in the 15-18 age category, 34% were age 19-25, 6% were age 26-35, and 9% were age 36-45, 2% were age 46-55 and 1% were over 55 years of age.

4.2.2 Key Career Influences

As can be seen from Table 1 below, personal interest is the primary career driver for most of the respondents, followed by future career opportunities. Course availability is ahead of current job opportunities, indicating that respondents are generally thinking about educating or training themselves for careers that are sustainable into the future more than about what is available currently. The high level of interest in course availability is reflective of the relatively large number of students in the sample. Work experience is slightly ahead of points requirements, which again indicates that labour market information is a key influencer of career choices made. In terms of more personalized influences, parents are seen as more important than guidance counsellors, friends or teachers. Respondents also seem to be reasonably entrepreneurial in orientation, with 67% of respondents viewing self-employment potential as being of some (38%) or strong importance (29%). Nearness to home is also a consideration for many respondents.

TABLE 1: Key Influences on Career

	N	Mean*	Std. Deviation
Personal Interest	299	2.8127	.42376
Future Opportunities	296	2.5541	.66162
Course Availability	293	2.2526	.69072
Current Opportunities	294	2.1837	.74376
Work Experience	294	2.1667	.73162
Points	290	2.1207	.83350
Self Employment	293	1.9590	.78842
Near Home	299	1.8462	.79200
Parents	297	1.8283	.69322
Exhibitions	294	1.7857	.65447
Guidance Counsellors	294	1.6565	.67703
Presentations	294	1.6497	.68856
Friends	297	1.5556	.70071
Teachers	296	1.5541	.66162

**The higher the mean, the greater the importance assigned to the variable in question.*

4.2.3 Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources

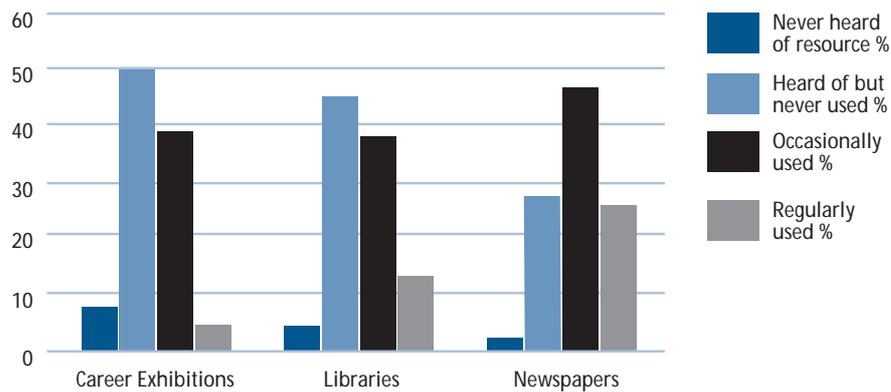
4.2.3.1 General Careers Information

Familiarity with different career resources differs across categories of information. Generally, respondents are familiar with traditional forms of careers information in the form of newspapers, libraries and career exhibitions.

TABLE 2: Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources

	N	Never heard of Resource %	Heard of but never used %	Occasionally used %	Regularly used %
General Careers Information					
Career Exhibitions	299	7	50	39	4
Libraries	302	4	45	38	13
Newspapers	299	2	27	47	25

FIGURE 4.1: Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources: General Careers Information



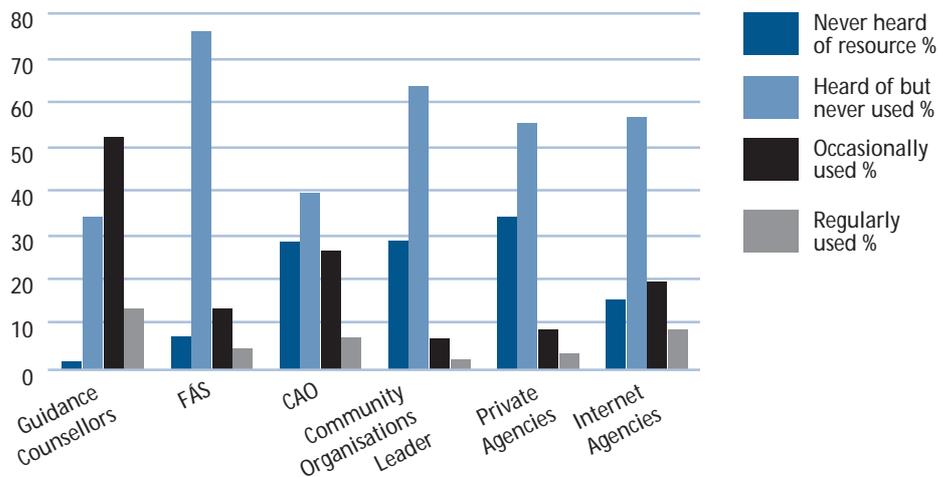
4.2.3.2 Familiarity with Agencies and Providers

Respondents were more familiar with guidance counsellors and FÁS than any other providers of careers information and had used guidance counsellors more (65%) than any other provider. Awareness and use of Internet employment agencies was stronger than that of high street or other private employment agencies.

TABLE 3: Awareness and Use of Different Careers Resources

	N	Never heard of Resource %	Heard of but never used %	Occasionally used %	Regularly used %
Agencies/Providers					
Guidance Counsellors		1	34	52	13
FÁS	301	7	76	13	4
CAO	300	28	39	26	7
Community Organizations					
Leader etc.	300	28	64	6	2
Private Agencies	302	34	55	8	3
Internet Agencies	301	15	57	20	8

FIGURE 4.2: Awareness and Use of Different Careers Resources: Agencies/Providers



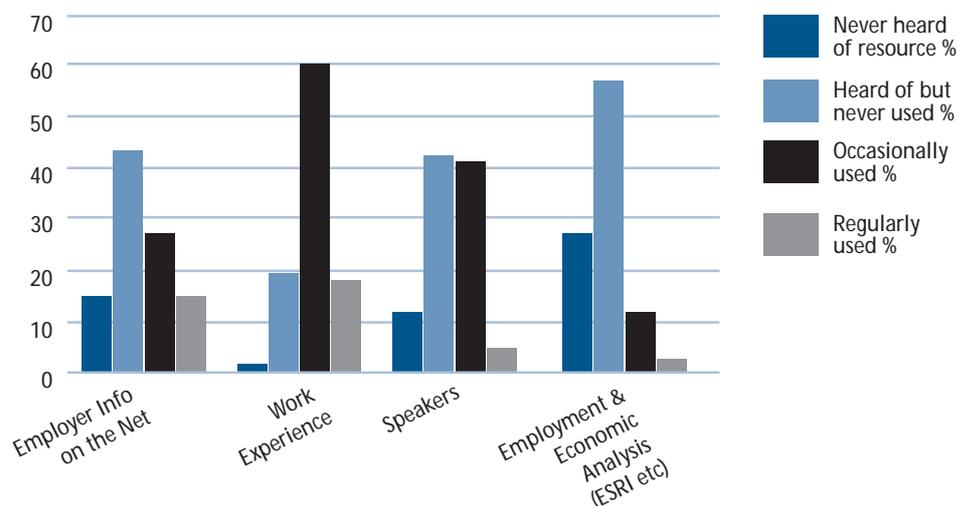
4.2.3.3 Familiarity with Labour Market Sources of Information

In terms of labour market sources of information or knowledge, most were aware of and had experienced a work placement (78%). Contact with company speakers (46%) and employer information on the web (42%) was more modest however, and familiarity with and personal use of formal labour market information (15%) by way of the EGFSN or other expert groups' publications was weak.

TABLE 4: Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources

	N	Never heard of Resource %	Heard of but never used %	Occasionally used %	Regularly used %
Labour Market and Economic Information					
Employer Info. on the Net	297	15	43	27	15
Work Experience	299	2	20	60	18
Speakers	302	12	42	41	5
Employment and Economic Analysis (EGFSN etc)	299	27	57	12	3

FIGURE 4.3: Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources: Labour Market and Economic Information

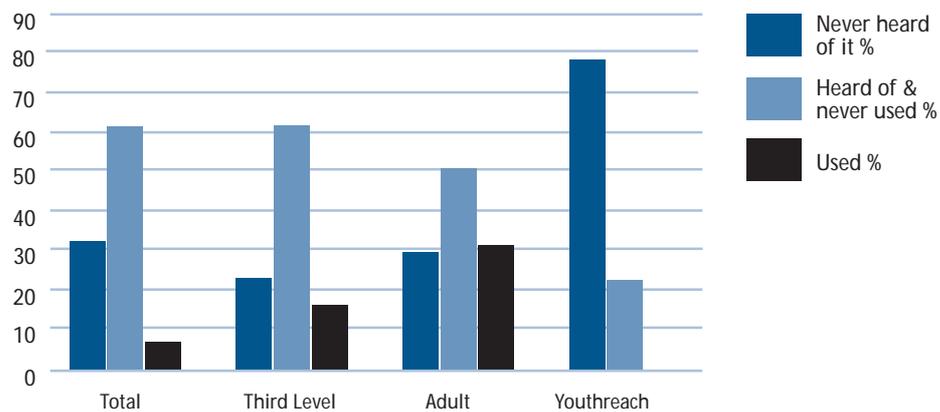


There were significant inter-group differences on this dimension (see Table 5 below) with adults being twice as likely (31%) as third level students to use this kind of information, who in turn were twice as likely as school students (7%) to do so. Within the adult group, high fliers were the by far the most active users of this information.

TABLE 5: Awareness of Formal Labour Market Information (EGFSN etc) by User Groups

	School Students N	%	Third Level N	%	Adult N	%	Youthreach N	%
Never Heard of it	35	32	30	23	10	29	7	78
Heard of & Never used	67	61	78	61	25	49	2	22
Used	8	7	21	16	16	31	0	0
Total	110	100	129	100	51	100	9	100

FIGURE 4.4: Awareness of Formal Labour Market Information by User Groups



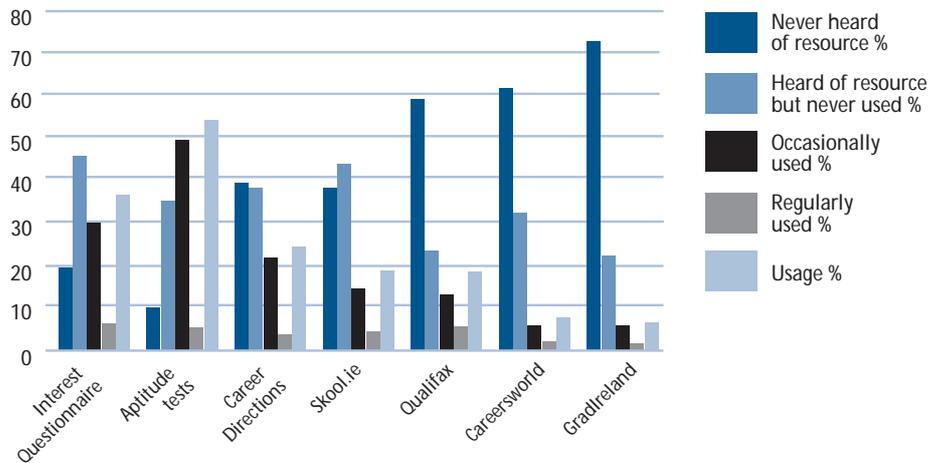
4.2.3.4 Careers Information Databases and Assessment Tools

Most respondents were familiar with aptitude testing and interest questionnaires. They were somewhat more likely to have used aptitude tests (54%) than interest inventories (36%).

TABLE 6: Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources

	N	Never heard of Resource %	Heard of resource but Never Used	Occasionally used %	Regularly used %	Usage %
Careers Information Databases and Assessment Tools						
Interest Questionnaire	300	19	45	30	6	36
Aptitude tests	296	10	35	49	5	54
Career Directions	296	39	38	21	3	24
Skool.ie	301	38	43	14	4	18
Qualifax	301	59	23	13	5	18
Careersworld	300	61	32	5	2	7
GradIreland	299	72	22	5	1	6

FIGURE 4.5: Awareness and Usage of Different Careers Resources: Careers Information Databases and Assessment Tools



Awareness and usage of different careers databases was generally weak. Respondents were least familiar with GradIreland – 72%, including a high proportion of third level students, had never heard of it. Most respondents had never heard of Careers World (61%) or Qualifax (59%) either. One school was an outlier in the sense that awareness of Internet course database products was high. Their guidance counsellor had directed them to Qualifax and Career Directions in careers class and they were almost unanimous in nominating these products as most helpful and the easiest to use in relation to making career choices.

Respondents were most familiar with Skool.ie and Career Directions and usage rates of these products (24% in the case of Career Directions and 18% in respect of Skool.ie) was correspondingly higher than average but still very low. With the exception of aptitude tests (54% usage rate), respondents who had heard of a given database product were more likely not to have used it than to have used it. Across the databases, knowledge of Career Directions appears to result in the highest level of use (24%), followed by Qualifax and Skool.ie (18% in both cases).

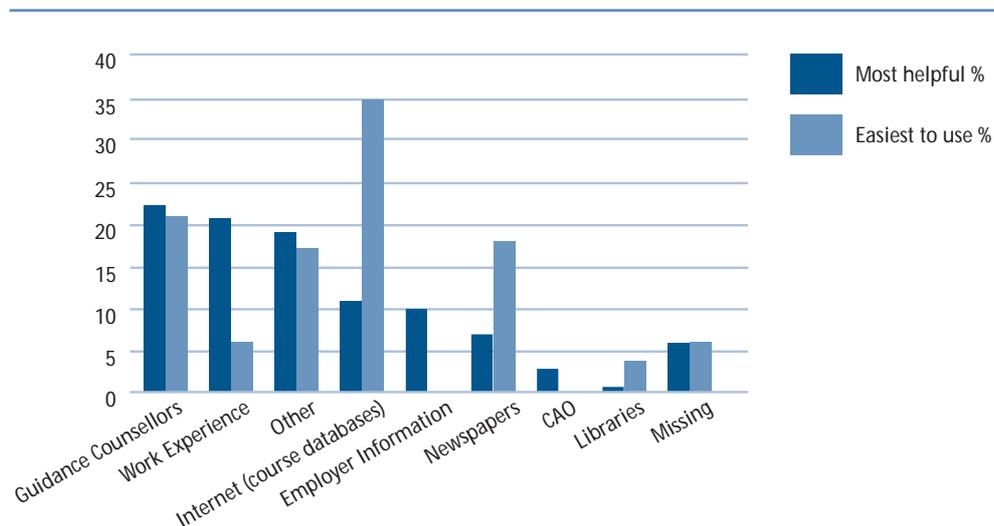
4.2.4 Most Helpful and Easily Used Resources

Guidance counsellors were most frequently nominated as the most helpful form of support (22%) followed closely by work experience (21%) and ‘Other’. The ‘other’ category accounts for networking and contacts (c. 8%), parents, family and friends (c.5%), prospectuses (2%) Internet and executive employment agencies (1%) and various other sources. Employer information was also rated as most helpful by 10% of respondents. Internet sources of information (both course and employer) was most frequently selected as the ‘easiest to use’ form of support (35%) followed by guidance counsellors (17%) and newspapers (18%).

TABLE 7: Most Helpful and 'Easiest to Use' Forms of Support

Career Choice Support	Most Helpful		Easiest to Use	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Guidance Counsellors	69	22%	59	21%
Work experience	63	21%	16	6%
Other	58	19%	48	17%
Internet (course databases)	34	11%	100	35%
Employer information	32	10%	-	
Newspapers	22	7%	50	18%
CAO	9	3%	-	
Libraries	3	1%	11	4%
Missing	17	6%	22	6%
Total	306	100%	306	100%

FIGURE 4.6: Most Helpful and 'Easiest to Use' Forms of Career Choice Support



Some noteworthy differences emerged with regard to how different user groups viewed different sources of information. Youthreach respondents, for example were highly reliant on newspapers, with 67% nominating this source as the most helpful whereas adults and high fliers in particular were much less likely to find newspapers particularly helpful (10%) and more likely to find a range of supports helpful and especially personal contacts and networking. School students were much more likely than any other group to find Internet course databases particularly helpful (19%) and third level students (29%) were much more likely than any other user group to nominate 'work experience' as the most helpful form of support. With regard to the ease of using various forms of support, there are smaller differences across groups, however newspapers are more likely to be nominated by adults and Youthreach respondents than any student groups, and student groups are much more likely than adults to find guidance counsellors easy to use, presumably because a service is available to them. None of the Youthreach respondents nominated guidance counsellors as the most helpful or easiest to use form of support and they are probably the user group most in need of one to one guidance.

4.2.5 Up to Datedness and Ease of Finding Information

Generally there were no significant problems with the up to datedness of information with 92% of respondents agreeing that information was up to date. Most respondents did not have difficulty finding information (78%). With the exception of the Youthreach group, this was a consistent finding. More than half of the Youthreach group reported difficulty finding information.

Third level students were the least likely user group to have experienced problems (17%). (Those that did experience difficulty reported a range of problems but the most frequently reported problem was the lack of detail contained in university prospectuses). Specific information on more specialised careers was also cited as a problem.

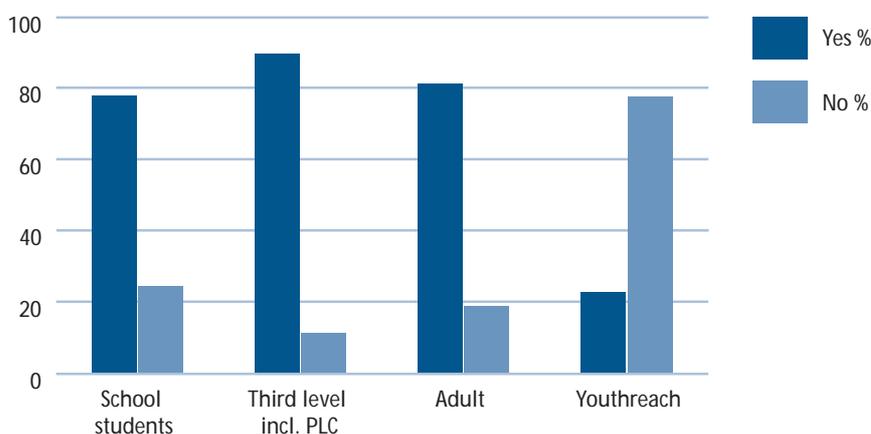
4.2.6 Access to Internet

Access to the Internet was high across most groups, with 89% of third level students, 81% of adults and 77% of school students having access to it at home. The Youthreach group (just two respondents had access at home) and the Donegal adults (where broadband seems to be unavailable) were the exception to this trend. Third level students were the most likely to have home access to the Internet (89%). Most of the Youthreach respondents indicated that they had access to the Internet at the training centre whereas most of the adults who did not have the Internet at home did not have access to it through work either.

TABLE 8: Access to Internet at Home by User Group

Internet at Home?	School students	Third level incl. PLC	Adult	Youthreach	Total
Yes	85 76.6%	114 89.1%	39 81.3%	2 22.2%	240 81.1%
No	26 23.4%	14 10.9%	9 18.8%	7 77.8%	56 18.9%
Total	111 100%	128 100 %	48 100%	9 100%	296 100%

FIGURE 4.7: Access to Internet at Home by User Group



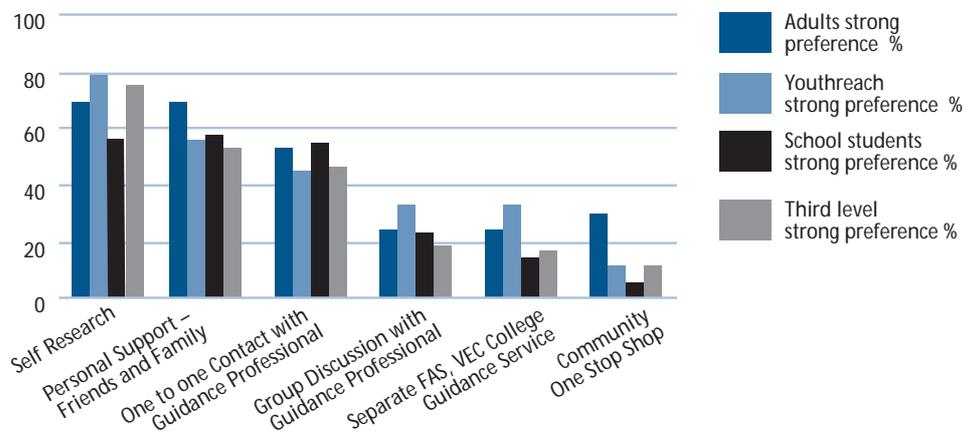
4.2.7 User Support Preferences

Researching users' own career choices using available services like the Internet and libraries is the preferred option of most respondents and especially so for third level students and Youthreach participants (bearing in mind the Youthreach sample size is sub-optimal). It should be pointed out that the focus group with Youthreach made it clear that they were in need of considerable hand holding support from staff when accessing the Internet. Personal contacts in the form of friends and family is also a very important source of career support and this is particularly the case for adults, who rely strongly on formal and informal contacts for new and career progression opportunities. Not surprisingly, one to one guidance is favoured over group guidance arrangements for all groups. Youthreach participants appear to be more open to group guidance sessions than other user groups and school students the least enthusiastic about such an arrangement. The desire for one to one guidance counselling is significantly stronger for adult and school student groups than for third level or Youthreach groups.

TABLE 9: The Preferences of Different User Groups for Different Support Arrangements

Preference	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	% Adults Strong preference	% Youthreach Strong preference	% School Student Strong preference	% Third Level Strong preference
Self Research	292	2.62	.58270	69%	78%	56%	75%
Personal Support in form of Friends and Family	291	2.50	.62904	69%	56%	57%	53%
One to one Conversation with Trained Guidance Professional	297	2.33	.76154	54%	44%	55%	46%
Group Discussion with Trained Guidance Professional	291	1.81	.76249	24%	33%	22%	19%
Separate FAS, VEC College Guidance Service	290	1.74	.73490	24%	33%	13%	17%
Community One Stop Shop	282	1.57	.69334	30%	11%	4%	11%
Valid N (listwise)	276			51	9	113	133

FIGURE 4.8: Preferences of Different User Groups for Different Support Arrangements



4.3 Themes Arising from Focus Group Discussions and Statistical Analysis

The issues and information needs arising from the focus group discussions with students and adults help contextualise the statistical data and are presented below. Issues of concern for particular user groups will be highlighted as relevant.

4.3.1 Detail of Course Content Information

School students in particular reported a strong need for detailed third level course content information from formal and informal sources:

‘Course information from guidance counsellors and leaflets show the points required but not what’s involved’.

‘I’d like advice and feedback on courses from previous students saying what is good and bad about the course’.

Many of the third level students reinforced this view, saying that they really did not know what they were taking on until courses were underway. The sketchy nature of prospectus information and the lack of course detail on university websites was raised by a large number of students and also by guidance counsellors. By contrast, the Open University website was highlighted by an adult high flyer, who had experienced similar information difficulties, as a model of good practice. UK prospectuses in general appear to provide better detail than Irish prospectuses, which, according to one expert contributor, are focussed more on design than content.

4.3.2 *Objective Jobs Information*

A similar need was expressed in respect of jobs and careers information. All groups wanted unbiased information about opportunities, preferably from first hand sources.

'(I'd like) inside information on day to day details of my chosen career'...

'We want to know the 'nitty gritty of what jobs are actually like'.

When asked how this information should best be made available the general view was there should be much more contact between companies and the classroom and that the style of presentation/interaction should be less promotional and more grounded in reality. Some of the third level students emphasised that the most valuable insights and advice came from informal contacts with recent graduates at employer events.

4.3.3 *Work Experience*

Work experience was also raised as a potentially important source of realistic careers and workplace information. The consensus was that properly organised, structured and supervised work placements were an invaluable resource. This is very difficult to achieve at second level, given practical and resource constraints. The quality of work experience is much better at third level but not consistently so. Many students highlighted a need for a much more structured approach.

Most of the students attending colleges that do not have work placement programmes expressed a need for work experience and a concern that employers' preference was to recruit from colleges that have such programmes. Other students were of the view that they would be spending enough of their lives at work without bringing it into college life.

4.3.4 *Awareness of Electronic Sources of Careers Information*

The lack of familiarity of all groups with careers databases is evident from the statistics reported above. Interest in the websites was high amongst those who had not encountered them prior to the survey.

This lack of familiarity probably contributed to the difficulties different user groups reported in using search engines to research career choices. Many were overwhelmed by 'googling' experiences, finding sources of information very fragmented and varied. They also reported difficulties mediating information, assessing its quality, reliability and validity.

4.3.5 *Awareness of Labour Market Information*

Awareness of labour market information ranged from minimal in the case of school students and Youthreach participants to strong in the case of third level students and most adult groups. School students had very limited knowledge of the economy and the labour market. They were interested in this kind of information but unclear as to where to source it.

Third level students are generally well informed about the economy and levels of demand in areas of interest, mainly from newspapers, the Internet and contacts.

Highfliers use published policy, statistical and business material interchangeably and are highly aware of occupational and salary trends in their chosen career areas.

Interest in labour market information was strong across all user groups. All groups were interested in employment trends, promotional prospects, benefit packages and salary trends in occupational sectors.

Third level students and adults were aware of the need for much more contact between schools and colleges with companies and industry:

'I would have benefited from more outings to different companies in secondary school, along with descriptions of actual working routine of real people.'

'Opportunities for schools to interact with industry need to be expanded. More organized placements (are needed).'

'Speaking to people in other industries and companies is very useful. This is a major lack at second level as by time in third level it is too late.'

'(I need) work experience... more information on practices in real world.'

Younger respondents stressed that, while they would not choose a career on the basis of positive labour market projections, they might rule out particular areas if all the pointers were towards decline. They were interested in the career paths of recent graduates who had studied the course they were about to or had entered and wanted much more nuanced detail on outcomes than is available in statistically based, highly aggregated destinations reports:

(I'd like) 'Information on what happened to people who chose the same course. See if it's successful or if there is a big demand for what you want to do. This would be very useful for the websites and information you publish to have this information.'

'Information on outcomes from arts degrees and what you can get out of them.'

'A weekly or monthly secondary school student newsletter with information on courses, requirements, career directions etc (would be great). Exciting news of the opportunities that are there for us.'

'Arts is a widely picked course and therefore should be more clear, e.g. matching subjects, future careers etc.'

'We should be given more up to date information on jobs you can branch out to and where the job is needed.'

4.3.6 Guidance Counsellors – Needs

School guidance counsellors have the widest range of careers to negotiate and would like up to date CDs and interactive material about different career areas and interview techniques. Careers CDs need to be 'networkable' for a classroom situation. They also would like stimulating lesson plans for different career areas and topics. Those that had been involved in the STEPS programme found it very successful in interesting and informing students (girls in particular) about engineering.

Guidance counsellors expressed a strong reluctance to promote any particular occupational areas on the basis of national need. It was emphasised that their professional responsibility is to guide within the framework of their client's personal preferences. They pointed to the downturn in jobs in the ICT sector and also highlighted disappointing outcomes for science and engineering students, despite predictions that these areas would yield interesting and challenging careers. In their view, it seems that the appetite

of the knowledge economy is for experienced professionals in these areas rather than new graduates who have, according to some of the guidance counsellors interviewed, moved largely into sub-optimal jobs in sales and technical support.

The guidance counsellors and representative bodies interviewed expressed a strong interest in labour market information and specifically information about likely skill needs, occupational trends, salary levels, developments – positive and negative, across wide range of sectors, as background information to student's own choices.

The nature of their work and the range of institutions and individuals dealt with means information for guidance professionals needs to be tailored accordingly, i.e. highly summarised, 'bullet pointed' and easily understood, factually based information from a reputable source about likely trends.

4.3.7 School Students – Needs

In terms of information needs, school students require much more detailed information about college courses. The availability and quality of college prospectuses needs to be improved, as does information on college websites.

A recurring theme in secondary schools, particularly in rural areas, was the importance of spelling out the implications of subject choices at a very early stage in post primary education:

'Subject choice and implications – I didn't know if I didn't study chemistry I couldn't do pharmacy which is what I now want to do'.

'It should be done very early in school so that subject choice is informed'.

'More information at school on subject choices, I wanted to do nutrition and needed chemistry and couldn't do it'²⁰.

Students made the point that guidance resources were concentrated on the senior cycle, at which point subject choices and corresponding career choices had to a great extent already been made. Many of the third level students reinforced this view, saying that guidance and preparation for careers needed to start much earlier in schools.

'I am fine now but at school the emphasis was on those who knew what they wanted to do rather than those who were unsure.'

In terms of informing themselves about career choices, students were unenthusiastic about career fairs, finding them difficult to negotiate, and crowded. They found it too difficult to find information and with little or no chance of meeting employees directly or informally. As with other groups, there was a strong interest in 'real life' honest information about different careers from people they could identify with.

Most of the students had engaged in some form of work experience and despite its flaws viewed it as a very important insight into the world of work. They also enjoyed College Open days.

4.3.8 Third Level Students – Needs

There seems to be an under-resourcing of guidance counsellors at third level. As a consequence, careers advice, according to the students, is very general and non-specialised. The desirability of faculty based careers service was raised in this regard.

A number of students called for a broader approach to careers information beyond the obvious employers for business, science, and engineering undergraduates. Many of the business students said that they felt corralled into careers in accountancy or the 'big 4' and would like to know more about alternatives.

²⁰ The minimum subjects work that is being done by Qualifax currently, which will allow students to check the consequences of dropping French, for example, should provide another source of information to students in this regard.

'I find it difficult to find out about graduate recruitment in marketing firms – all information is about accountancy firms.'

'(We are) bombarded with information on accountancy only. Found it very difficult to get information on other options.'

The engineering, IT and science students made similar points saying that they would like to know how they might apply their skills in the third sector, the developing world or in improving the environment.

A large number of those interviewed were still unsure about career choices. They stressed the importance of undertaking broad degrees with transferable skills if unsure at school about career paths. Students were generally surprised to find employers being more interested in soft skills like teamwork, communication etc than in degree subject knowledge.

4.3.9 Women Returners – Needs

Most of the women returners plan to return to work after absences averaging five years. Personal confidence was identified as an enormous issue for this group. Typically, they had little or no sense of entitlement regarding further training or development and found institutions intimidating, making it difficult to progress, even if the time was right.

None of the women had any awareness of careers databases but were aware of training opportunities 'out there'. They felt that career guidance support would be beneficial in helping them filter down information on different courses and make appropriate choices.

'Career guidance should be more widely available to adults.'

'(We need) back to work courses to build our confidence. Child minding is expensive and should be near jobs.'

While they agreed that careers information is a need, it was secondary to personal factors like loss of confidence and practical childcare arrangements.

In terms of overcoming some of these issues they felt that part time opportunities should be actively disseminated to parents in the home and that the most effective means of doing so is through parent's notice boards in schools, backed up by outreach adult guidance support. They were also keen on work experience, job tasters and talks by employers to get a 'real' picture.

They felt that community centres were more approachable than mainstream training or educational centres and that career support services aimed at returners would be best initiated in community centres in the first instance.

In terms of course provision, the women's major need was for expanded availability of morning part-time courses that fit in with primary school hours²¹. This would obviate the need for paid childcare arrangements, which is their preference because of affordability and quality concerns. A difficulty experienced however is that, even in cases where courses of interest are timetabled considerably, they are ineligible for VTOS funding which is restricted to full-time courses. However, funding is available for some part-time courses under the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) for those in receipt of social welfare to afford them an opportunity to combine a return to learning with family, work and other responsibilities. The BTEI offers a chance to participants to pursue new education options that could lead on to employment. Those who do not satisfy social welfare criteria may have to pay fees, which can be difficult for full-time parents or those on lower incomes.

²¹ Qualifax is actively exploring the possibility of making 'morning courses' a new course group for search purposes. It should be available in May 2006.

4.3.10 Youthreach – Needs

A major need for this group and early school leavers generally was for guidance counselling to commence before rather than after take-up of a course within the Youthreach scheme. According to staff and the group itself, the main motivation for pursuing particular courses was peer influences rather than informed choice and decision-making.

During the focus group it was evident that the young people had a strong reliance on centre staff and would need considerable support in making career choices.

This group were completely unfamiliar with labour market information or skill needs but felt it would be very useful to know what likely trends were in areas of interest.

The presentation of information is very important, given literacy issues amongst the typical Youthreach population. As such there is a need for more visual and interactive material.

They also stressed a desire for first hand, jobs information, presented informally by people they could relate to:

‘Somebody who will sit down and talk to us and tell us what it’s really like.’

4.3.11 Adults with Redundancy Experience – Needs

Most of the adults in this group were middle managers who had been employed in the food and drinks industries. Having experienced redundancy, they felt there was a strong need for adult guidance service and support services:

‘Enormous amount of effort has gone into bullying and sexual harassment policies but there is nothing on redundancy, which is more likely to occur. Your confidence is destroyed, particularly when treated shabbily.’

‘People who have been through it would make good mentors for others. Good for the economy to make sure some guidance/emotional support in place so skills not lost’.

‘It’s important to have help compiling credible CV, can you imagine what it’s like trying to assemble a CV if you’ve been made redundant after 20 years with one employer.’

Some of this group had been provided with external executive career support as part of the company redundancy arrangement and found these interventions very valuable. However, the majority were given little notice of or support with their impending job loss. All of those asked said that they would be prepared to pay for quality guidance services if available.

In terms of needs, it was stressed that circumstances have a major role to play in recovering from redundancy. It is much easier for those who are young (under 35), well educated and, critically, with good contacts to make the transition back into work than those who are older and have less transferable skills or experience.

The extent to which jobs are not advertised was referred to by almost all of those with a redundancy history, the message being that the importance of networking cannot be overstated.

While networking was instrumental in securing new jobs for most of this group, they had, over the course of their journey back to work, utilised private recruitment and executive search agencies more than any other group in the study:

'Private/executive recruitment agencies are great for those who are in demand skills and age wise, they are very demoralising to deal with if not'.

Some of the more negative experiences reported included discernable lack of interest, repeated telephone calls not being returned and being 'hurried through' initial interviews.

Most of this group avoided Internet employment agencies because of concerns about confidentiality.

A number had tried to use FÁS services, with mixed results:

'FÁS is great for trades and vocational areas, it's not great for graduates or professionals – there is a need for a more holistic approach which is not classified by sector – when you go in the door all you see is hotel and catering, construction etc and there is nowhere for you'.

A number of those made redundant said that FÁS has an image problem and it is very difficult for people of a certain generation to use its services.

Finally this group was strongly aware of sectoral demands and the need to constantly upgrade knowledge and skills. They expressed a strong interest in enhancing their skills/qualification levels but stressed how difficult this is in the Irish educational and training system, which largely runs on a 9-5 model.

4.3.12 Adults Retraining/Experiencing Sectoral Decline – Needs

This adult group were engaged in a corporate transition from a manual craft skills base to becoming a techno-craft company and were re-skilling themselves, mainly at third level.

Like the women returners, many had left school early and had fears about returning to education because of negative experiences. They said they would not have returned to education had it not been for the *'strong push but great support'* from their training manager.

This group had little awareness of skill needs of the economy and said that skill gaps were not a factor in their decision-making. The main drivers for them were availability of local jobs, courses and personal interest.

They felt that information needs did not change greatly over the life span and that information per se was not the issue – proactive dissemination and person centred, needs based support is what is needed to support major skills change.

Again, the need for an adult guidance service was emphasised in the form of one to one sessions at the start of careers and at major change junctures to help identify competencies, aptitudes and weaknesses. Their preference was for an independent, locally based service not attached to FÁS or the VECs. Ideally, what they would like is one to one specialist, needs based guidance with input from employers. They would also like to see aftercare/tracking support made available to those negotiating major changes.

This group, like many of the adults, stressed the importance of finding out through guidance and aptitude testing what people are good at so that they are helped to make good choices based on what they can do:

'There is too much focus on careers and not enough on identifying personal needs and aptitudes.'

As adult returners to education, they felt college guidance services were almost completely oriented to the needs of school leavers and needed to be adapted to take account of the varying needs of adults. They also felt that college guidance counsellors needed to be more knowledgeable about likely employment and labour market trends.

4.3.13 Occasional Workers from Rural, Isolated Area – Needs

This group comprised mainly young people (under 25) from South West Donegal. All lived a considerable distance from mainstream training and education centres. While they had good familiarity with local training opportunities they felt that there were very limited options available to them. FÁS had run some (outreached) courses locally but none were being run at the time of the interviews.

Transport, finance and information were very real barriers to pursuing mainstream training or apprenticeships. Interviewees described the Catch 22 situation of needing qualifications to get a job, but without a job being unable to travel or meet the other costs involved in gaining qualifications, even on funded courses.

Access to careers information was also difficult. They pointed out that course information is mainly available by computer, which in their case was problematic:

'No broadband, can't access the Internet.'

'We can only get Internet on satellite at 100 euro per month.'

Library facilities were also very limited. This area receives a travelling service, which means that careers information is not generally carried.

Many of those interviewed were knowledgeable but felt hopeless about their labour market situation:

'Future skills needs? Just look at the job situation here, there are no needs for us to have skills for.'

According to respondents, the few unskilled jobs available locally were subject to increasing competition from other workers who were prepared to work for less than the already low going rate.

More skilled job seekers were also being squeezed out by strong competition from Dublin house price 'exiles'.

'I used to do a lot of supply teaching, now there are 30 applicants for one position. All want rural lifestyle – cheap houses that a job will pay for, unlike in Dublin.'

The needs of this group are much more fundamental than information improvements can address. Having said that, a clear need for one to one guidance sessions and more outreached, community course provision targeted at young people was expressed.

4.3.14 High Fliers – Needs

This group comprised highly successful and very senior individuals in the fields of business, law, engineering, science, telecoms, accountancy and recruitment.

As has been noted, high fliers are generally very well informed about economic/labour market issues and use this information to plan their careers and anticipate change. They rely strongly on personal and business contacts, together with self directed research for career development purposes.

Their key drivers/priorities include interesting, worthwhile and challenging work, good remuneration, and exceptional working environment – family friendly hours together with excellent in-house training and facilities.

This group did not have major information or support needs. The one issue that was raised by a number of these individuals related to the paucity of information available about individual companies. They saw a need for a comprehensive directory of company information, addressing issues like in house training, family friendly and promotional policies etc.

This group felt that there were a number of issues that needed to be addressed to improve careers information for younger people. They were almost unanimous in calling for greater use of aptitude testing – identifying what individuals are good at and at various stages of the life span. In their experience of recruiting, this makes for good matching between the person and the occupation, which in turn increases the likelihood of successful outcomes in both directions.

They also felt that there was much more scope in the education system for direct contact between companies/industry and students by way of more work experience, practical information and training which is referenced to sectoral skill requirements.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings of the research and draws conclusions therefrom.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

In this Chapter, the statistical, matrix and interview focus group results are discussed and conclusions drawn.

5.1 Awareness of Careers Databases

The Internet is a major source of careers information but the fragmented, hit and miss nature of searches means that there is a huge lack of awareness of available resources. One school countered this trend, demonstrating good awareness of Qualifax and Career Directions. This school has careers and life skills classes for fifth year students and all had been made aware of and had used the above named databases during this class. So, while there is a clear need for availability of these sites to be widely publicised in the media, there is also a need for guidance counsellors to introduce students to these sites during school hours. Advertising their existence to the wider community would benefit both parents and adults with guidance needs.

5.2 Development of a Central Careers Portal

The research findings point to a strong need for a central Irish careers portal, which would contain careers, course and labour market information, organisational/company profiles, a range of assessment tools and testimonials and appropriate linkages to related sites. What is envisaged is not a "monster" site containing all sources of information but a high quality, co-ordinated gateway site, which is clearly referenced to different user groups and stages in the careers continuum.

The information sources that are required to develop such a system are all in existence, if requiring adaptation in some cases. The recently produced National Skills Bulletin²² contains a general overview of skills and labour market trends across sectors which could easily be adapted for different user groups. It also contains statistical data on employment trends in visual format, providing the factual information requested by many respondents. As indicated in paragraph 3.5.4, this information is in the process of being incorporated into the SLMRU website, linking occupations with labour market information. It does not contain information on salary trends but again this information is available from the Central Statistics Office and could be added at a later stage. Oasis (www.oasis.gov.ie) and Basis (www.basis.ie) contain a wealth of complementary information, which could easily be provided through appropriate links.

5.3 Accessibility of Labour Market Information

There is a good level of interest across all user groups in easily digested labour market information about skill needs, occupational, employment and salary trends. There is also considerable interest in information about intra-company work practices and work conditions. Adults, in particular, articulated a need for a comprehensive directory of company information, detailing in-house training, family friendly and promotional policies. This was something they hoped industry bodies like IBEC would develop.

More generally, the style of presentation of labour market information is important, given the range of user groups with information needs. Labour market information needs to be factual, understandable and available at different levels of detail to suit different requirements. The occupational overview information is of interest to career guidance professionals and needs to be adaptable for use with students of different ages and levels of comprehension. As such it needs to be highly summarised and visually presented where possible. The more academic and detailed information should also be available for those who wish to conduct research or to be well informed.

²² Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2005), *National Skills Bulletin*. Skills and Labour Market Research Unit. Dublin: FÁS.

Guidance counsellors are as interested in information about likely declines in sectoral activity as they are in positive projections about science or engineering for example. However, they are only willing to use this information as background material because of ethical and practical concerns. They are not willing to promote particular areas because of understandable concerns about the accuracy of forecasts, and because the promise of engineering and science has, in their experience, yet to be borne out for young graduates.

5.4 Informal Information Needs

There was a strong demand from all groups for informal information about careers and day-to-day experiences about what jobs and courses are actually like. This could come about by hosting a discussion forum online but may be best dealt with locally through companies and employees providing a good variety of careers talks and seminars in schools.

5.5 Self Assessment Tools

The range of assessment tools available currently on Irish sites is limited and the quality is questionable. Many of the inventories are difficult to use and interpret²³. Testing, of its nature, is imprecise. It is generally agreed that such instruments work best as a part of a portfolio system, ideally mediated by professional guidance support. While it may not be practical or professionally advisable to have aptitude tests or more interpretative systems like 'Myers Briggs' or 'Careerstorm' available on a portal, the availability of more sophisticated and individualised instruments through professional guidance and occupational psychology services should be signalled, as should the limitations of testing generally. Other tools that could well be made available include CV builders, and work preference styles.

5.6 Structuring Information to User Group Profile and Stage of Career Continuum

If it is agreed that a single career portal or gateway system should be developed, it is critical that its design facilitates a high degree of information access by different user groups at different stages of career planning. In short, any portal is only as good as it is usable. Many of the Irish sites examined over the course of this research have good but poorly structured information. The Canadian portal referred to has a very user-friendly framework for managing searches depending on where an individual is on the careers continuum. Its career exploration system provides a framework for users to look at their skills and interests, look at the world of work, make a plan, and manage their career. Appropriate information on or links to a range of resources including careers counsellors, ability, interest and preference quizzes, planning software, guides to career change and course information are all provided under three hyperlinks: Identify your Career Options; Research Career Options and Make Career Decisions.

Irish sites tend to distinguish between user groups in terms of education level or broad categories like mature vs. student users. The low level of awareness of Irish adults of career databases, together with the perception that such information is not really for them, needs to be overcome through effective promotion and design. This is particularly the case amongst user groups who have little or no sense of entitlement because of poor educational experiences. A feature of the Canadian system which could well be adapted in an Irish context, is the inclusive and explicit targeting of resources to a wide range of adult user groups including those who:

- Were recently laid off;
- About to be made redundant;
- Wish to return to school;
- Wish to change career;

²³ Improvements are anticipated with the introduction of My Futures Interest Inventory to the Qualifax site.

- Are older workers;
- Have been absent from the workforce for a long period.

Such an approach would require little additional information. Instead, available information needs to be structured and targeted in such a way as to make it obvious to all users that their interests are catered for. A minor example of how this might work would be to provide information on morning part-time courses under the hyper links for those who wish to return to study or work after parenting.

5.7 Industry – Educational Interaction

The main contact between school and third level students and industry is through work experience programmes. Company and employee talks and information seminars are another important source of learning about the world of work but not as well established as work experience programmes.

5.8 Work Experience – School Students

Generally students valued work experience programmes highly even if their individual experience had been disappointing. In many schools, participants were responsible for securing their own work placement. The quality of placement came down in many cases to the student (or their parent's) influence with employer contacts. This is problematic from equity and practical perspectives. If placements did not work out, students and the schools were in an awkward position because they were perceived to be under a compliment to the companies concerned. It would be unrealistic to expect a high-level workplace experience for school students, given their lack of training and level of maturity. However, work experience programmes could be more consistent if structured better. At a minimum, an agreed set of objectives, expectations, key tasks and expected codes of workplace behaviour could usefully be drawn up to guide the work placement and perhaps be formalised between the schools and companies engaged in the scheme.

5.9 Work Experience – Third Level Students

On the basis of respondents comments, there would appear to be an even greater need for a more consistent approach to work experience at third level. Work experience forms an important part of course requirements in a large number of colleges and the quality reported is variable. Again, there is too much reliance on the good will of individual employers. In many cases it appears that there is also a lack of structuring or supervision of work placement experiences and outcomes.

Unlike in the UK and other countries, some industry bodies and associations do not seem to be centrally involved in managing or providing work placement programmes. Industry bodies such as IBEC, the Chambers of Commerce and ISME together with relevant educational bodies could have an important role in helping to develop a code of practice for school and college work placements. More formal involvement of industry could also lead to a more centralised approach to work placement provision, increasing the range of opportunities open to students while also making the process more equitable.

5.10 Less Formalised Forms of Work Information

Much more contact between schools, colleges and industry/work organisations by way of employer talks and testimonials would be of great value. All of the groups involved in this study placed the highest value on balanced information – the good and not so good aspects of different jobs and types of workplace. What they would like is more nuanced, experience based information which is non-promotional in style and ideally presented informally by recent job holders.

5.11 School Student Guidance

This report confirms earlier findings by the National Guidance Forum that there is an imbalance between guidance inputs at junior and senior school cycle. Guidance is concentrated on senior school students when subject choices, which have a strong bearing on eventual career choices, have already been made. More input at a much earlier stage in second level education is needed so that restrictive choices are not made. Students also need much more detailed information on college courses by way of prospectuses. Many UK universities provide excellent templates for Irish colleges to emulate in this regard.

5.12 Third Level Employer Information

At third level, there would seem to be a need for a more imaginative approach to guidance and career choice, both by guidance counsellors and through information sources on careers databases. Employer information generally is confined to the larger players and is more prominently and attractively presented on GradIreland and other third level careers websites than on other sites.

Students would like information on and contact with a wider range of employers, not just leading corporate or accountancy firms, but also including SMEs and non-profit organisations.

5.13 Adult Guidance

There is a clear need for adult guidance services for those negotiating major career changes, such as impending job loss or return to work after a long absence. Guidance help is needed most at the point of decision-making and to help those with educational or computer literacy needs to mediate information on specific careers/jobs and courses. Counselling and life skills help may also be needed with some groups if careers guidance is to be viable.

At present, the pilot adult guidance is only available to those who are undertaking specified forms of training. While FÁS guidance services are universally available, they are focused on vocational work areas and not perceived to be suitable for those with non-technical backgrounds. There are also gaps within services. For example, the Youthreach participants are not entitled to guidance support until after they sign up, at which point course decisions have been made, often on the basis of inappropriate criteria.

It is important to state the reality that different categories of users often feel more or less comfortable with different types of service. Some of the women who have been out of the workforce for some time, for example, said that they would feel intimidated by a large institution like FÁS. Others were delighted with FÁS. Some of the adults who had been made redundant would have been keen to use the pilot adult guidance service but were ineligible. Most of the high-flying adults relied almost exclusively on personal contacts and would be more inclined to use private guidance services if the need arose. Furthermore, the statistical results demonstrate a relatively low level of interest in a 'one stop shop' and indicate a preference for a range of services.

So, while there are gaps in adult guidance services, the best means of addressing them is not clear. It is unlikely that one size will fit all needs. Improvements are more likely to be based on a combination of public and private facilities. There is a willingness amongst respondents to pay for professional guidance and there may be potential for developing private markets in this regard. Having said that, there is also a strong rationale for a publicly supported guidance outreach service for those geographically, economically or educationally marginalised. It is beyond the scope of this research to recommend how guidance services should be configured but the options, which are not mutually exclusive, might include:

- Access to a register of accredited private guidance counsellors and occupational psychologists;
- Development of FÁS/VEC guidance provision to cover wider adult population;
- Development of a voucher system to enable consumer choice of public and private providers.

5.14 Final Comments

This report examined the collection and dissemination of career guidance information across the education and training systems. The major finding is that there is not a significant problem with careers information per se. There are plenty of good sources of careers information which, with the development of the Internet, are becoming more available to non-professional users. There are difficulties, however with levels of awareness about quality careers information sources and with the accessibility of some of that information. The lack of awareness about dedicated career and labour market information is a concern that needs to be addressed by national and local promotional campaigns. Once awareness reaches a critical baseline level, it is anticipated that word of mouth will do the rest of the work because there is a good demand for what the databases contain. This task will obviously be much easier if a decision to move to one central portal is taken.

The accessibility of careers information needs to be improved in respect of labour market information. At present, the reports produced by the Group are well suited to policy and professional audiences and are highly valued for their objectivity and research rigor. However, if this information is to reach a wider audience it needs to be adapted accordingly. The new National Skills Bulletin goes a long way to meeting the need for more summarised cross-sectoral information but the style or tone of presentation is still some way from what a school student or an adult with no third level education might feel drawn to. There are examples of this kind of information being translated into more user-friendly language. The Canadian www.jobfutures.ca is a best practice case in point. Other areas where accessibility of careers information could be improved is by developing much better formal and informal links between a wide range of employers and schools, colleges and Youthreach centres. All of the groups in this study wanted more informal, personalised contact with companies. They also expressed a need for better formal arrangements, possibly mediated by employer bodies to guide work placement activities and produce detailed company information.

Dealing with other accessibility issues is more difficult. A number of important policy and institutional issues (rural transport, flexible and outreached course provision, funding-eligibility) intersect with careers information. For some groups, these and other constraints restrict access to information. While outside the immediate remit of this study, these factors are instrumental in ensuring equitable access and uptake of career opportunities amongst more vulnerable groups and individuals.

Chapter 6 contains the recommendations.

6. Recommendations

The bodies with overall responsibility for guidance, namely the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment should collaborate to progress the following recommendations through or in consultation with the appropriate agencies and professional associations.

Recommendation 1: Development of a Portal

The Departments of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and Education and Science should explore the feasibility of developing a central Irish careers portal or co-ordinated gateway site.

This would contain careers, course and labour market information, organisational/company profiles, a range of assessment tools and testimonials, a guidance helpline and appropriate linkages to related sites. In addition to school and third level user groups, this site should be clearly targeted at other less typical user groups at different stages in the careers continuum, including those who:

- Were recently laid off;
- Are about to be made redundant;
- Wish to return to school;
- Wish to change career;
- Are older workers;
- Have been absent from the workforce for a long period;
- Wish to become self-employed.

Clearly defined ownership of the website development and subsequent management needs of the portal is critical, to ensure that the superb design of the portal, if it is to guarantee its accessibility and usability, is established and maintained. Examples of international good practice should be closely studied and possibly emulated where applicable, in trying to progress such a project.

A significant amount of valuable information on various aspects of careers information and related tools and topics is currently available on a number of websites and other sources within the Irish education and labour market sectors. The following are particularly useful examples which could be incorporated into an eventual portal:

- The National Council for Guidance in Education has compiled the Irish section of the PLOTEUS²⁴ European portal;
- The publication of the first National Skills Bulletin, to be repeated on an annual basis, would, with some adjustment, accord with how labour market information should be presented on an Irish Portal;
- The FÁS Career Direction site, which has the most developed approach to labour market information could be expanded to include sectoral overviews;
- A substantial amount of work is already underway in developing Qualifax to become a central course information site. Recent improvements in its self-assessment facilities are promising;
- The Oasis site developed for government by Comhairle, providing front line information on government services, is accessible and comprehensive and would provide the needed links to information on welfare and other civic issues;

²⁴ Portal on Learning Opportunities Throughout the European Space, which provides information on studying, training and living in Ireland or any other EU, EEA or pre-accession country.

- Business Access to State Information & Services (Basis) provides a single access point on all government services for businesses, thus addressing the needs of those interested in self-employment;
- Community exchange provides information on available jobs in community and voluntary organisations in Ireland.

It may be possible to develop one of the existing careers databases into a portal, thus avoiding further duplication and unnecessary expenditure. A technical examination of the four main career/course databases would be necessary before any major decisions could be made in this regard. What needs to be done is an estimation of the design and content journey of careers sites currently, to what an eventual portal, along the lines of the Canadian model, would be. The feasibility and cost of developing either an existing site or a new site from first principles can then be fully explored.

Whichever site is to become the vehicle for Ireland's careers portal, serious consideration should be given to the name, to reflect the broad careers remit and to facilitate ease of search engine recognition.

Recommendation 2: Promotion of Existing Career Sites

The lack of advertising of career sites has had a negative impact on their use. Their existence (Qualifax, Career Directions, Grad Ireland etc) should be widely promoted to all potential users in the media.

All guidance professionals should also be advised to introduce students and FÁS clients to these sites during contact hours. If a national portal is to be established, a high impact publicity plan should be developed from the outset.

Recommendation 3: Improving Access to Useful Labour Market Information

Both the availability and accessibility of labour market information should be improved on careers databases.

The Group should take overall responsibility for advising on and monitoring of this recommendation and consult with appropriate parties in doing so. The availability of labour market information should be articulated on the home page of careers databases or an eventual portal. Information should be understandable by the widest possible range of target groups and as such should be readable, highly summarised and visually presented where possible. More academic and detailed labour market information should also be available for those who wish to conduct research or wish to be further informed.

Recommendation 4: Improving Existing Career Guidance and Information Resources

A wider range of reputable self-assessment tools, including CV builders, should either be made available directly on Irish careers sites or through appropriate linkages.

The best use and limitations of these tools should be highlighted. The availability of more sophisticated and individualised instruments should be signalled, as should the availability of professional guidance and occupational psychology services. In this regard the various guidance interests should examine the possibility of establishing a register of accredited practitioners.

The Departments should ask guidance bodies (Institute of Guidance Counsellors, the Association of Graduate Careers Services in Ireland, the Institute of Technology Careers Advisory Network and FÁS Employment Services) to examine how best to communicate the demand from all groups for informal information delivered by recent job holders and students about day-to-day work and course experiences.

Practical recommendations as to how this might be brought about, include online discussion fora and through links with employer bodies, companies, employees and ex-students.

There are good practice examples of work placement in existence in Ireland and these might usefully be sought out as models. Work experience is seen by those surveyed as a way of gaining valuable information about the nature of different types of jobs and careers, at both second and third-level. The possibility of industry/other work organisations becoming more formally involved in managing and structuring third level work placement programmes might usefully be explored by the relevant industry/organisational bodies²⁵, guidance bodies²⁶, the Council of Heads of Irish Universities and the Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology. The Department of Education and Science is best placed to take the lead role in advancing this. As part of this process, the relevant parties should examine how third level guidance practitioners could be supported to provide information on and contact with a wider range of companies and non-profit organisations to students.

There is a need for institutions to continually review their prospectuses and course information to provide maximum relevant information for prospective students. Institutions should benchmark themselves against best international practice.

The Departments of Education and Science, Social and Family Affairs and Enterprise, Trade and Employment should examine how careers information, in the context of existing adult guidance services, might be adapted or extended to meet the needs of those who are not currently attached to the education or training system. Such groups would include those who are unemployed, under-employed, facing possible redundancy or absent from the work force for long periods because of caring responsibilities.

²⁵ IBEC, CCI, Public Jobs, SFA and a community and voluntary sector representative e.g. the Wheel.

²⁶ The Association of Graduate Careers Services in Ireland and the Institute of Technology Careers Advisory Network.

APPENDIX 1: MATRIX ANALYSIS OF CAREERS INFORMATION RESOURCES IN IRELAND INCLUDING ELECTRONIC, NON-ELECTRONIC AND SELF-ASSESSMENT RESOURCES

Resource/ Source	Target User Groups	Content	Comprehensiveness	Up to Datedness/ Timeliness	Economic/Labour Market Content	Accessibility/ User Friendliness
Principal Careers Information Tools Available in Ireland						
Skool.ie www.skool.ie	Junior and senior cycle school students	A-Z Careers Index, 'me and my job' and course information	Limited – many occupations not included (e.g. doctor, psychologist). Other occupations full range of careers not covered e.g. the Law category does not cover barrister, the civil servant category does not cover graduate entry grades (Administrative Officer/Third Secretary)	Good	Some good analysis of skill needs of industry and future employment prospects (see science and pharmacy sections). Also Career Focus has good discussion of salary trends and skill requirements	Good – information and style of presentation well tailored to school audience
Careers World www.careersworld.com	School students, young people, graduates, adults at work/seeking work	A-Z Careers Index, Career preferences self-assessment tool, industry guide, employee profiles, course finder (CAO & PLC), job search	Good in terms of careers and course information covered. The organisational links section is limited to large organisations. Small firms and self-employment options are not covered. Self assessment limited to preferences exercise	Good	Industry Guide provides introduction to the sector and indication of and skill needs of employers and future prospects. Has links to a number of employer organisations and employment opportunities therein	Good – minimal registration requirements

Principal Careers Information Tools Available in Ireland (cont.)

Resource/ Source	Target User Groups	Content	Comprehensiveness	Up to Datedness/ Timeliness	Economic/Labour Market Content	Accessibility/ User Friendliness
Qualifax National Courses Database www.qualifax.ie	Senior Cycle students, adults, learners, guidance practitioners	Qualifax is at its core a national on-line information database of some 12,000 educational courses currently operating in second-level, third-level and further education (FE) sectors including Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) provision, evening and short-term courses at both second & third level, a range of FE courses including VTOS, Youthreach, Traveller and Adult Literacy courses, and details of FÁS, Fáilte Ireland (CERT) and Teagasc training courses. Details on courses, the qualification concerned, entry requirements, the institution in which they are offered, relevant fees, grants and entitlements and application procedures are provided. The Institute of Guidance Counsellors holds the Qualifax brand name under licence and a database is maintained and updated cyclically by a staff of eight teleworkers. The main users of the process are Guidance Practitioners, Second Level Students and Adult Learners. The database is accessible on-line and is also provided to educational institutions free of charge on CD for ease of access in a multi-user environment (schools and training centre). The Database already constitutes the most comprehensive source of course information available to the public and in addition provides a range of support elements including interest assessment & CAO points calculation software, grant scheme advice, careers events, calendars etc.	Comprehensive educational and training course listing	Good	Limited	Good if primary need is informational on educational and training courses and points requirements. Important aspects of site have yet to be added/completed

Principal Careers Information Tools Available in Ireland (cont.)

Resource/ Source	Target User Groups	Content	Comprehensiveness	Up to Datedness/ Timeliness	Economic/Labour Market Content	Accessibility/ User Friendliness
Career Directions (FAS)	All Job Seekers	Career Matching. A-Z Careers Index includes information on role, personal qualities, salary levels, entry routes, training and qualifications, adult opportunities. Job and FAS course vacancies	Very comprehensive career listing includes areas like abattoir worker and acoustic physicist. (See Careers World above)	Good – job vacancies listed by date and appear to be updated regularly	Limited but currently being linked to such data on the SLMRU website	Good
GradIreland gradireland.com Association of Graduate Careers Services in Ireland (AGCSI) and GTI Specialist Publishers	Graduates	A-Z Careers Index, Careers Advice covering: CVs assessment centres, choosing career etc. Employment Vacancies Assessment tools	A-Z comprehensive in terms of graduate careers graduates covers self employment. Focus on choosing career, being selected for position rather than labour market information	Good	Reasonable – some useful information in the sectoral career guides for graduates – these booklets would be of great interest to school students	Good – but some information needs to be better signposted e.g. sectoral guides – younger students may not look under publications. Volunteering information also needs to be signposted
Day Courses Learning Ireland www.daycourses.com	Students completing School	Database of Irish University, Institute and College courses, both public and private. Includes information on Course content, duration, entry requirements, location, timing (day and night courses are listed) Discussion fora on career, education and course related topics. Which Career (A-Z)	Course Information is very comprehensive. A-Z careers information is limited to relatively few occupational areas. Limited information on FAS courses but link provided	Entry requirements are not referenced to year	Good labour market pointers, e.g: ‘The electricity business is growing. Electricians are needed to cope with advances in IT, heavy industry and household appliances, to wire new buildings and convert old ones. So if you can tell a green wire from a red one this might be for you...	Good, the data base is easy to access and understand. The writing style is universally appealing and accessible

Principal Careers Information Tools Available in Ireland (cont.)

Resource/ Source	Target User Groups	Content	Comprehensiveness	Up to Datedness/ Timeliness	Economic/Labour Market Content	Accessibility/ User Friendliness
Expert Group on Future Skills Needs skillsireland.ie		Policy oriented reports on skills needs of the Irish economy needs	Most reports are sectorally based, recent National Skills Bulletin very comprehensive	n/a	Excellent quality information and analysis	Reports are suited to policy audience mainly, sector specific and academic. For careers information users, bulletin is more suitable
FÁS e-college	Adult learners	Interactive computer based course provision mainly in business and ICT areas	n/a	n/a	n/a	Good for featured areas
FÁS Jobs Ireland www.fas.ie	Job Seekers and employers	Job vacancy search facility	Good for vocational jobs, less comprehensive for professional areas	Good	n/a	Good
Central Applications Office www.cao.ie	School students and entrants to third level education	Third level course and points requirements for private and public higher education institutions	Information is focussed on application process	Up to date course requirements and applicant statistics	n/a	Reasonable

Principal Careers Information Tools Available in Ireland (cont.)

Resource/ Source	Target User Groups	Content	Comprehensiveness	Up to Datedness/ Timeliness	Economic/Labour Market Content	Accessibility/ User Friendliness
Other Electronic Sources of Careers Information						
Institute of Guidance Counsellors			n/a			
Oasis www.Oasis.com	All Citizens	Information on all government services including education, training, grants and welfare entitlements	Excellent information on public services	Good	n/a	Readable and lucid
Ploteus www.ploteus.com		EU website detailing learning, training and exchange opportunities together with grants and moving country information within the EU	Good links to education and training sites and information throughout Europe	Good	n/a	Reasonable – varies – dependent on quality of country's national information systems
Kompass www.kompass.ie	Businesses and job researchers	Information on wide range of Irish companies	Limited to legalistic/business output type information	Up to date	n/a	Moderate. Targeted at business and researchers
Public Jobs Publicjobs.ie	Job Seekers	Current and upcoming job vacancies in public sector	n/a	Good	n/a	Good
IBEC	Businesses	Information on and analysis of business and competitiveness issues	n/a	Good	Good but strong business perspective	Reasonable. Targeted at senior business personnel and policy makers

Principal Careers Information Tools Available in Ireland (cont.)

Resource/Source	Target User Groups	Content	Comprehensiveness	Up to Datedness/ Timeliness	Economic/Labour Market Content	Accessibility/ User Friendliness
Institution of Engineers	Students interested in engineering, professional engineers, academics and companies	Job vacancies, Professional accreditation, best practice case studies, news and events	n/a	Good	Good information on engineering opportunities and interesting company case studies	Good
www.careersinhealth.ie	Those interested in career in health	Search engine for current job vacancies in the Health service executive	n/a		n/a	Reasonable, information provided on benefits and specialisms is fairly limited

Principal Non-Electronic Careers Information Tools Available In Ireland

Event/Resource	Target Audiences	Time/Period	Promoter/Content	Location	User Friendliness
Graduate Career Fair	Graduates of DCU, IADT, DIT St Patrick's, IoT, Tallaght and TCD	October each year	70+ employers (mostly large firms)	RDS	Reasonable – can be crowded (see Report) and difficult to negotiate. Need more opportunities for more informal contact with recent employees
Graduate Career Fair	UL graduates	October	Limerick		Reasonable
FAS Opportunities Fair	School/college students and adults	February	FAS – Europe's largest education, careers and skills showcase drawing together leading employers, education organisations and skills sectors under one roof	Croke Park, Dublin	Good
UCC Careers Fair	UCC Graduates	October	Cork		Reasonable
NUIG	NUIG Graduates	November	Galway		Reasonable
Alternative Careers & Volunteering Fair	University of Limerick	March	NGOs, co-ops, non-profit, volunteering and arts organisations	UL	Good alternative to mainstream information and companies
Careers Fairs	Institutes of Technology students	October-November	IOT Colleges locally	Various IOT Colleges	Reasonable

Principal Careers Information Tools Available in Ireland (cont.)

Event/Resource/	Target Audiences	Time/Period	Promoter/Content	Location	User Friendliness
Helpline	Leaving certificate Students	May	Professional guidance counsellor support	Telephone lines supported by the Irish Times, Irish Independent, Eircom, BT and Parents	Good
Youth Information Centres	Young people under 26	Year round	YICs provide advice and information on careers and referral if necessary. Services include notice boards & special displays, computer databases, a low cost CV preparation service and Internet access	Nationwide: a minimum of one and up to four per county	Good
Libraries		Year round	Good general careers information. Also a source of Internet access. Specialised/detailed information available at the ILAC Central Library in Dublin	Throughout Ireland, more limited mobile service in remote rural areas	Good
Irish Times		Year Round	Careers information and labour market analysis tailored to school and adult audiences. Job Advertisements	n/a	
Irish Independent		Year Round	Careers information and labour market analysis tailored to school and adult audiences. Job Advertisements	n/a	
Local Newspapers and Evening papers			Local job opportunities and local economy. Job advertisements	n/a	Good
Individual Companies (e.g. Big Six and other major firms)	Students/job seekers	n/a	Calendars, diaries, informal and structured events at colleges and open days. School talks and work placements	n/a	Difficult to find detailed information on individual companies unless institutional arrangements or good network in place

Principal Careers Information Tools Available in Ireland (cont.)

Event/Resource	Target Audiences	Time/Period	Promoter/Content	Location	User Friendliness
Compass Directory					
FAS Employment Offices	Unemployed, adults, school leavers		Regional Offices and Local employment service in disadvantaged areas	Large regional centres throughout Ireland	Good generally for those in trades/vocational areas of work. Local employment service more accessible for those with need for more intensive engagement
VEC Pilot Adult Guidance Service	Adults		Guidance service to adult learners in literacy, VTOS and community education programmes	24 locations throughout Ireland see: www.ncge.ie/adult_guidance.htm for contact details	Good, outreach element particularly helpful for those who have been out of work/education for some time
Irish Research Council Science Engineering and Technology National Research Symposia	SET Postgraduate students	November each Year	Irish Research Council Science Engineering and Technology under Auspices of Department of Education and Science	Croke Park	Good
Science Week Ireland	Students and Adults	November	DSE Forfás. Demonstrations of science technology and innovation events by enterprise, the media, educational, arts, libraries and other institutions	Nationwide	Good
Steps Seminars	Pre leaving certificate students	Year round	Institute of Engineers. Engineering graduates give presentations on their experiences studying and working in engineering. Steps is also involved in producing classroom resources and developing partnerships	Schools nationwide	Good

Principal Assessment Tools Available in Ireland

Self Assessment Tool	Sources	Content	Quality	User Friendliness
Occupational Matching	www.careerdirections.ie	Four level Occupational matching (unskilled to professional) to interests and preferred management style	Wide range of discriminating questions and good detail on recommended careers. Not a standardized Instrument	Easy to access (minimal registration requirements) and use. Good level of occupational detail. Photo descriptions good for those language/literacy problems
Career Preferences	www.careersworld.com	Measures career preferences, proposes individual career profile and prompts exploration of potentially suitable careers and/or courses	Some questions are too job specific and the choices seem artificial at times. Not a standardized Instrument	Easy to access and use
Interest Assessment	www.Qualifax.ie	Five point Likert scale on broad interests	Wide range of broad based questions. Not a standardised instrument. New and improved assessment system 'My Futures' will replace	Easy to use but difficult to interpret/understand/apply. When used, ranking of courses did not reflect interests well. No summary of results provided
Myers Briggs Inventory	Qualified guidance counsellors and psychologists. Available for a fee on various websites	Model of personality, which examines intuition, feeling, judgement and introversion dimensions and can be applied to career preferences	Good, well-validated but requires specialist interpretation	Good if administered in a one to one context
Repertory Grid Technique	Qualified guidance counsellors and psychologists. Available for a fee on various websites. (e.g. www.careerstorm.com)	Individualised examination of personal constructs which can be applied to career choices and decision making	Good, but requires specialist to administer	Good if administered in a one to one context
Various including Myers Briggs Tests and Enneagram tests	www.geocities.com/lifexplore/	Non-profit site attempting to become largest personality test site – wide range of careers and personality inventories available	Good range of tests and sensible commentary on limitations of testing	Reasonable. Personality tests are better administered in a one to one context with professional feedback

Appendix 2 – References

Department of Education and Science (2000), White Paper on Adult Education: Learning for Life. Dublin: Government Publications.

Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2005), National Skills Bulletin. Skills and Labour Market Research Unit. Dublin: FÁS.

González, P. and Romaguera, M. (2004) Vouchers, Inequalities and the Chilean Experience. Chile: Center for Applied Economics (CEA) University of Chile.

Human Resources Development Canada and the BC Ministry of Education, Training and Technology – with the permission of the copyright owner, the Canadian Career Development Foundation (2001). Making Career Sense of Labour Market Information Online Publication <http://makingcareersense.org>

Kellett, R. Bezanson, L. (2001), Integrating Career Information and Guidance Services at Local Level. Paris: OECD.

Levin, H. and Belfield, C. (2004) Vouchers And Public Policy: When Ideology Trumps Evidence. New York: National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, Columbia University.

OECD, the Canadian Government in collaboration with the European Commission, the World Bank and the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (2003), Report of Conference on Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap held in Toronto, Canada, on 6-8 October 2003.

OECD (2002), Review of Career Guidance Policies – Ireland Country Note. Paris: OECD.

Plant, P. (2002), IT in Careers Guidance: Constructs and Learning Computer-Assisted Careers Guidance: Some European Perspectives. Copenhagen: Danish University of Education.

Sultana, R. (2004), Guidance Policies in the Knowledge Society. Trends, Challenges and Responses Across Europe. A Cedefop Synthesis Report. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.

Task Force on Lifelong Learning (2002), Report of the Task Force on Lifelong Learning. Dublin: Government Publications.

Watts, A.G. (1996), Careerquake. London: Demos.

Watts A.G. & Sultana R G (2003), Careers Guidance Policies in 36 Countries: Contrasts and Common Themes. Toronto: Paper for the CEDEFOP Conference on Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap.

Appendix 3: Steering Group Members

Fergal Costello (Chair)	Higher Education Authority
Ruth Carmody	Department of Education & Science
Jack Golden	CRH Plc
Peter Brabazon	Discover Science and Engineering
Brian Mooney	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
Eileen Fitzpatrick	National Centre for Guidance in Education
Barry Comerford	SLMRU
Martin Shanahan	Forfás
Kay Hallahan	Forfás

Appendix 4: EGFSN Members

Anne Heraty	CPL Resources PLC	<i>Chairperson</i>
Senan Cooke	Waterford Crystal Ltd.	<i>Member</i>
Jack Golden	Cement Roadstone Holdings PLC/IEI	<i>Member</i>
Una Halligan	Hewlett Packard	<i>Member</i>
Joe McCarthy	Arkaon Ltd.	<i>Member</i>
Dr. Sean McDonagh	<i>Former</i> Director of Dundalk IT	<i>Member</i>
Aileen O'Donoghue	IBEC	<i>Member</i>
Peter Rigney	ICTU	<i>Member</i>
Linda Tanham	Mandate	<i>Member</i>
Dr. Brendan Murphy	Cork Institute of Technology	<i>Member</i>
Pat Hayden	Dept. of Enterprise, Trade & Employment	<i>Advisor</i>
Ruth Carmody	Dept. of Education & Science	<i>Advisor</i>
Andrew McDowell	Forfás	<i>Advisor</i>
Fergal Costello	Higher Education Authority	<i>Advisor</i>
Roger Fox	FÁS	<i>Advisor</i>
Ann Nolan	Dept. of Finance	<i>Advisor</i>
Martin Shanahan	Forfás	<i>Head of Secretariat</i>

Appendix 5: EGFSN Publications

Report	Date of Publication
Data Analysis of In-Employment Education Training in Ireland	December 2005
Skills Needs in the Irish Economy: The Role of Migration	October 2005
National Skills Bulletin 2005	October 2005
The Demand & Supply of Foreign Language Skills in the Enterprise Sector	May 2005
Skills Requirements of the Digital Content Industry in Ireland Phase I	February 2005
Innovate Market Sell	November 2004
The Supply and Demand for Researchers and Research Personnel	September 2004
Literature Review on Aspects of Training of those at Work in Ireland	June 2004
Financial Skills Monitoring Report	November 2003
Responding to Ireland's Growing Skills Needs – The Fourth Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs	October 2003
The Demand and Supply of Skills in the Biotechnology Sector	September 2003
Skills Monitoring Report – Construction Industry 2003/10	July 2003
Benchmarking Education and Training for Economic Development in Ireland	July 2003
The Demand and Supply of Engineers and Engineering Technicians	June 2003
The Demand and Supply of Skills in the Food Processing Sector	April 2003
National Survey of Vacancies in the Private Non-Agricultural Sector 2001/2002	March 2003
National Survey of Vacancies in the Public Sector 2001/2002	March 2003
The Irish Labour Market: Prospects for 2002 and Beyond	January 2002
Labour Participation Rates of the over 55s in Ireland	December 2001
The Third Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs – Responding to Ireland's Growing Skills Needs	August 2001
Benchmarking Mechanisms and Strategies to Attract Researchers to Ireland	July 2001
Report on E-Business Skills	August 2000
Report on In-Company Training	August 2000
The Second Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs – Responding to Ireland's Growing Skills Needs	March 2000
Business Education and Training Partnership 2nd Forum, Dublin	March 2000
Business Education and Training Partnership	
Report on the Inaugural Forum, Royal Hospital Kilmainham	March 1999
The First Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs – Responding to Ireland's Growing Skills Needs	December 1998

Appendix 6: Contributors to Research

The following parties were consulted over the course of this research and contributed generously of their time.

User/Stakeholder Group

Schools

Newpark Comprehensive School, Blackrock, Co Dublin
Greendale Community School, Kilbarrack, Dublin
Rathangan School Kildare
St Leo's College, Carlow
Our Lady of Mercy Secondary School, Waterford

Youthreach

Youthreach Tallaght, Dublin

Post Leaving Certificate Colleges

Ballyfermot Senior College
Gorey Community School
Carrick on Shannon Community School

Institutes of Technology

Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT)
Cork IOT
Institute of Art Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire

Universities/Private Colleges

University College Galway
University College Dublin
Portobello College Dublin

Institutional Stakeholders

Cement Roadstone Holdings
Department of Education and Science
Discover Science and Engineering, Forfás
Higher Education Authority
IBEC
National Centre for Guidance in Education
Institute of Guidance Counsellors
Skills and Labour Market Research Unit FÁS
Employment Services FÁS

Adults

Private Individuals
Waterford Crystal employees
Ballyfermot Education Equality Initiative participants

