



TOWARDS THE PROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION OF GUIDANCE COUNSELLING IN IRELAND.

An IGC National Executive policy paper

(May, 2023)

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Foreword

On behalf of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC), I welcome the publication of this policy paper and I would like to acknowledge and thank the members of the Policy and Practice Working Group (PPWG), in particular Dr Liam Harkin, for their diligent research, detailed discussions, writing and editing of the document over the past number of years. I would also like to recognise the foresight of my immediate past-President Beatrice Dooley for initiating this work in October 2020.

All organisations, big and small, need a clear roadmap and strategic vision for the short-, medium- and long-term. This document provides a clear pathway for the IGC to further develop professionally over the next decade or so.

This policy paper defines professionalism and contends that guidance counselling is a professional occupation; it provides a chronology of developments and thinking around professionalism in guidance counselling in the first two decades of this century; it affirms that the IGC has the capacity to undertake all the functions, organisation and oversight needed by a national professional organisation; it contains four recommendations for the IGC around professionalism and it outlines the roles and functions of a future fully professional IGC, as an aspirational series of professional goals, which have been categorised as short-term, medium-term and long-term.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Tadhg Crowley'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letter 'T' being particularly large and stylized.

Tadhg Crowley,

IGC President

Acknowledgements

The Policy and Practice Working Group (PPWG) was set up in October 2020, with the specific remit of exploring if and how the IGC could develop professionally.

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Dr Liam Harkin, May 2023.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACCS	Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
ASTI	Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland
CDI	Career Development Institute (UK)
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CORU	Regulating Health and Social Care Professionals, Ireland
CPTP	Careers Profession Task Force (UK)
DE	Department of Education
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
FET	Further Education and Training
IGC	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
ISSU	Irish Second Level Students' Union
JMB	Joint Managerial Body
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCGE	National Centre for Guidance in Education
NE	National Executive (IGC)
NICE	Network for Innovation in Career Guidance and Counselling in Europe
NICEC	National Institute for Career Education and Counselling (UK)
NPCPP	National Parents' Council Post Primary
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
PPWG	Policy and Practice Working Group
PSI	Psychological Society of Ireland
TC	Teaching Council
TUI	Teachers' Union of Ireland

Towards the professional recognition of guidance counselling in Ireland. An IGC National Executive policy paper.

This paper contributes to the growing discourses around professionalism and constructing a professional identity in the guidance counselling sphere, that have taken place both internationally and in Ireland, for about 15 years. It defines the notion of professionalism in relation to guidance counselling, and it looks at developments in this area over the past decade and a half. Specifically, it articulates a policy direction with regard to professionalism for the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) going forward, and it provides a roadmap for further developing and increasing professionalism within the organisation in the short-, medium-, and long-term.

Defining professionalism

In Ireland as elsewhere, there is already wide acceptance that there are certain professional roles which cannot be carried out by just anyone. Some of these roles are protected by law while others are tightly regulated by professional associations such as the Medical Council, the Teaching Council, the Law Society and the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI). As Hooley, Johnson and Neary (2016) noted, there is “*widespread social acceptance of the idea that it is in the public interest that doctors, lawyers, teachers and a range of other roles should only be open to people who have the required qualifications, education, training, skills and experience*” (p. 3-4).

At the outset, it will therefore be useful to attempt to define professionalism in relation to guidance counselling. A profession has been defined by Professions Australia as “*a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards*” and who are accepted by the public “*as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of others*”. Similarly, Saks (2012) emphasises that having certain knowledge and expertise are key factors that distinguish professionals, while Everts (2014) underscores the importance of professional attributes which include the

possession of knowledge and skills, which are based on a common body of theory and enacted through a recognisable set of professional practices, while the main mechanisms to assure the quality of guidance services include the initial training of practitioners and their ongoing continuing professional development (CPD), overseen by a professional association.

Professionals operate within a professional culture (Evans, 2008) in which personal and professional development are regarded as essential. High-quality, ongoing CPD is an essential aspect as it ensures a level of quality assurance, it is essentially *“the process whereby people’s professionalism and/or professionalism may be considered to be enhanced”* (Evans, 2008, p.15). Robust theory and quality research upon which theory is based, should inform practice, this ensures that the knowledge underpinning practice is cutting-edge, being constantly updated (Mulvey, 2013). Pan-European research into the academic training of guidance professionals has recognised the need to develop skills and competencies in initial training, placing great emphasis on developing professionalism as a fundamental competence, that translates readily to lifelong CPD (NICE, 2012).

A recent succinct description that encapsulates much of the above discussion of professionalism is provided by O’Reilly et al. (2020):

Professions are recognised occupations that require specialised knowledge, training, and skills. Entry into professions is gained through high level qualifications, such as university degrees. The theoretical knowledge base and profession-specific qualifications distinguish professions from other occupations and create a unique identity for them and their members. Professions have defined entry pathways that assist members who practise in the field (practitioners) to construct their professional identity.

As the Foreword to the 2010 report of the UK Careers Profession Task Force (CPTF) stated: *“Professionalism underpins quality, and our recommendations are designed to uphold common professional standards and ethics that will raise the standards and integrity of career guidance”* (CPTF, 2010).

Is guidance counselling a profession?

The IGC believes that guidance counselling in Ireland is a recognised profession with a unique holistic identity, based on the criteria referred to above. It is one that requires specific knowledge, training, and skills.

Entry to the profession at post-primary level is gained through holding an undergraduate degree and obtaining a recognised postgraduate qualification in guidance counselling, followed by registration with the Teaching Council. For the tertiary sector, entry is gained through holding an undergraduate degree and obtaining a recognised postgraduate qualification in guidance counselling. Postgraduate qualifications in guidance counselling provide guidance counsellors in Ireland with an appropriate theoretical knowledge base, profession-specific specialist training and counselling skills.

Guidance counsellors apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of others. To uphold professional standards, guidance counsellors can avail of CPD, provided at local IGC branch level, and at the annual IGC National Conference. A detailed Code of Ethics for guidance counsellors has been developed by the IGC and is updated at regular intervals. A comprehensive competency and practice framework has also been agreed and published by the IGC, as have a set of professional practice guidelines.

Chronology of developments around professionalism in guidance counselling

- In 2009, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) acknowledged that there was “*a huge variation across Europe in terms of professional training available, competences and qualifications acquired through such training, roles and functions carried out by guidance practitioners and settings in which guidance services are offered*” (CEDEFOP, 2009). The 2009 report advocated three categories of competences necessary for professional career guidance – foundation

competences, client-interaction competences and supporting competences. The report also listed in detail what these competences might entail.

- In terms of qualification-level and CPD activities, Iceland, Finland, and Serbia are to the fore, where specific qualifications are a legal requirement to practice in guidance counselling. Of these, Iceland is one of the countries where professionalism in guidance has been most advanced over the past decade, and where in 2009, the professionalism of guidance was enacted on a legislative basis. In Iceland, the law states that only *“certified educational and vocational counsellors should provide guidance”* (Vilhjálmsson, p. 154).
- Since 2009, Iceland is one of the few countries where guidance counsellors have protected professional recognition for their role in schools, through a licence system: *“only those who have been licensed by the Minister of Education can use the title Educational and Vocational Counsellor, and work as such. A licence is granted to applicants who have completed education in educational and vocational counselling at a university approved by the Ministry of Education”* (Vilhjálmsson, p. 154).
- In the United Kingdom, the report of the 2010 Careers Profession Task Force (CPTF) *“entrusted the profession with much of the responsibility for change; to shape its own destiny and to forge a stronger profession”* (Johnson and Neary, 2015). The report advocated enhancing the professionalism of the sector, including establishing an overarching professional body and common professional standards. The report made 14 recommendations which aimed to provide a framework that would support the sector moving forward and to take responsibility for itself.
- In 2012, the Network for Innovation in Career Guidance and Counselling in Europe (NICE) classified the activities that comprise the skill base of a careers professional into a handbook for the academic training of career guidance and counselling professionals (NICE, 2012).
- One of the CPTF’s recommendations resulted in the establishment of the Career Development Institute (CDI) in the UK in April 2013. Also in 2013, the Gatsby Foundation in the UK commissioned research on what career guidance in England

would be like if it were good by international standards. This resulted in the *Good Career Guidance* report, which was published in 2014. The eight benchmarks set out in the report serve as a framework for improving careers provision in English second-level schools.

- In 2015, the Careers and Enterprise Company was set up by the UK Government in response to the Gatsby report, with the aim of supporting the implementation of the benchmarks in schools and colleges with a national network of support, resources and targeted funding.
- The relevance and vital importance of ongoing CPD for UK careers practitioners was highlighted by Neary (2014), who argued that engagement with CPD is a cornerstone of professional practice that enhances both professional identity of the individual practitioner and the professional status of the sector.
- Following the 2009 CEDEFOP report, there were ongoing discussions within the National Executive (NE) on increasing professionalism within the IGC. These discussions led to the publication in 2016, of a comprehensive report which describes in detail the necessary core competences required of guidance counsellors in Ireland - Guidance Counselling Core Competencies & Professional Practice (2016).
- Subsequently, the IGC met with CORU (Ireland's multi-profession health regulator) to request that CORU would recognise the counselling aspect of guidance counsellors' work. However, the response from CORU was that it was felt that guidance counsellors would not meet their benchmark to be considered professional counsellors, as the counselling element of guidance counsellor training courses was not at a high enough level (IGC, 2020).
- In response to the CORU feedback, the IGC rolled out the National Strategic CPD Initiative over three years, where strand two in particular, focused on guidance counsellors' personal counselling CPD needs.
- Devising a standardised guidance programme framework for Icelandic schools was one of the main building blocks or key steps that was put in place in Iceland, before

legislation enshrining the legal role and title of Educational and Vocational Counsellor was enacted. In Ireland, a somewhat similar Whole School Guidance Framework (WSGF) was developed and published by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) in 2017, to support schools in “*planning and delivering a comprehensive whole school guidance programme that meets the needs of all students*” (p.6). This framework has been adopted in principle by the Department of Education (DE) but has never been made a formal requirement in second-level schools. Six years on, the NE would welcome any IGC involvement in reviewing the WSGF, if being undertaken by the DE Guidance Unit or as part of the Senior Cycle Review being undertaken by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

- According to a report on lifelong guidance published by the European Commission in 2020 (Barnes et al.), some 17 CEDEFOP member countries have already established legally defined qualifications of career practitioners, including 14 EU countries; however, Ireland is not one of these. The countries with these definitions are Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Iceland, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey. Barnes et al. recommended that “*there should ... be national recognition of career guidance as a profession, as this would guarantee the minimum competences of the professionals.*” (p. 25). In 2020, the NE recognised that this was something that the IGC needed to explore as a matter of some urgency.
- General agreement was reached in the NE in 2020 on the policy priority of achieving professional status for guidance counsellors. In late 2020, the Policy & Practice Working Group (PPWG) was set up and started a scoping exercise, to look at countries where guidance is on a more professional footing than in Ireland to see what could be learnt from their experiences. Watts (2015) argues for the value of comparing policies and practices in one’s own country to others, as by “*showing that things are done differently elsewhere, it causes one to question practices which otherwise tend to be taken for granted and it also permits policy borrowing, where ‘new possibilities can be indicated which can be adapted to one’s own situation’*” (p. 271).
- In 2021, CEDEFOP updated its 2009 paper on professionalising career guidance in member countries. It underlined the importance of constant upskilling and CPD: “...

continuous professional development, in-service and workplace training, as well as informal peer learning among colleagues, are equally important; practitioners themselves must seek training, learning while working, and self-development” (CEDEFOP, 2021, p.3). This report also recommended that any discussion of professionalism in guidance must include the impact of technology and digitalisation on guidance.

- The issue of professionalism in guidance counselling was explored and discussed for 18 months in the PPWG between October 2020 and March 2022. The PPWG presented a draft discussion document and facilitated a detailed in-person discussion within the NE in April 2022.
- Further consultations took place, and a draft of this discussion paper was presented to the PPWG for feedback in March 2023. The PPWG agreed on a second draft in April 2023 and the NE agreed on this final draft in May 2023.

Is the IGC a professional organisation?

Since its inception, the IGC has done a great deal to enhance the professionalism of the guidance counselling sector in Ireland, and a solid foundation has been laid on which the guidance counselling profession can expand and grow. Based on the discussion on defining professionalism above, it is clear that the IGC largely conforms to the description of a professional organisation:

- a) There is a strong professional evidence base for lifelong guidance in Ireland, as described in the NICE handbook (2012) and by Hooley (2014).
- b) Certain initial qualifications are necessary for membership of the IGC.
- c) An IGC Code of Ethics is in place, which is reviewed regularly at AGM and updated as required which “*demonstrates professionalism by adhering to legal, ethical and professional competence standards*” (Swain, 2008), however this Code is “*advisory rather than imperative*” - a phrase used by Nilsson and Hertzberg (2022), referring to the Code of Ethics for the Swedish Association of Guidance Counsellors.

- d) A competency and practice framework and a set of professional practice guidelines has been published by the IGC (2016) which describes and defines professional standards.
- e) High-quality certified guidance counselling CPD, at local IGC branch level and at the annual IGC national conference, has been provided for at least two decades. However ongoing engagement with the CPD offered is currently not a requirement for continued IGC membership.
- f) The IGC acts as a professional organisation which manages and develops the guidance counselling profession and serves as a community of practice, organising an annual conference, online and in-person CPD and networking opportunities.

There is one area, where significant work remains to be done to enable the IGC call itself fully professional, that is the area of self-regulation. While the IGC currently **regulates admission** to the organisation and **manages membership**, it does not currently regulate the guidance counselling profession with regard to quality assurance, quality control, ethics compliance or malpractice.

Does the IGC have the capacity to undertake all the functions, administration and oversight needed by a national professional organisation for guidance counsellors?

In April 2022, the NE formed the opinion that the IGC, as a largely voluntary body with a small number of part-time employees, currently does not have the capacity to undertake the myriad of roles required of a professional organisation like the CDI (UK), the Medical Council, PSI, etc. but that this is something that the organisation should aspire to in the medium- to long-term.

The NE has explored the various roles and functions that a fully professional IGC should aspire to and has agreed a non-exhaustive series of professional goals for discussion purposes. This set of professional goals was partly informed by the CDI in the UK and is provided at the end of this document. The NE accepts that implementing all these professional goals will take a substantial amount of time and resources. The NE expects full professional recognition to take

at least a decade to achieve and has therefore come up with a series of short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals to achieve this aspiration, together with some interim measures.

Interim measures

A decade is a substantial time to wait for the achievement of full professional status for the IGC. Many current members will have retired before this is achieved. The NE explored some possible steps that could be taken in the interim period to see if other organisations, where guidance counsellors are already members, could offer some degree of increased visibility / status / recognition.

The largest cohort of IGC members, those who work in second-level schools, already have professional recognition, but as teachers, not as guidance counsellors. As the IGC website notes in its FAQ section: second level *“guidance counsellors must register with the Teaching Council of Ireland. The Teaching Council requires that you must have a Post Graduate Diploma in Education, MEd or equivalent in addition to your guidance counselling qualification. An approved qualification in Guidance Counselling is not, of itself, sufficient for practice with second-level students though it may be sufficient for working with PLC students or adults”*.

It is the Teaching Council (TC) which oversees and implements this requirement through its annual registration process. So, currently, guidance counsellors in schools must self-designate as teachers, each year at registration renewal with the TC in order to get paid their salary. Many of this cohort of registered teachers do not work as teachers but as guidance counsellors, but their guidance role is effectively invisible within the TC, despite paying annual membership. For some, their employment contract in their school is as a teacher, while for others it is as a guidance counsellor. Currently, the TC does not provide any recognition, status or protection to guidance counsellors concerning their guidance role in schools, (it only recognises their previous/other role as teachers). Internationally, it is not uncommon, as Watts (2015) notes, for guidance counsellors to be regarded as a sub-group of teachers, who have:

“initially trained as teachers but have had substantial in-service training in counselling and now spend most of their time on guidance and counselling activities: in effect, their guidance role has taken on the attributes of a sub-profession within the teaching profession” (p. 281).

In the recent past, this absence of a professional role definition for Irish guidance counsellors, and the absence of any reference to a guidance counselling role in the employment contracts of some guidance counsellors in second-level schools meant that many guidance counsellors had to return to teaching their curricular subjects when the ex-quota guidance allocation was removed in 2012, as three IGC National Audits and two doctoral dissertations have demonstrated (IGC, 2013/ 2014/ 2016; Harkin, 2015; McDonnell et al., 2016).

Given that the NE estimates that gaining full professional status for guidance counsellors could take a decade or more, it would seem sensible that as **an interim step**, the IGC should approach the TC to explore the current anomaly, and to request recognition as guidance counsellors for those TC members working in guidance (a significant cohort of its members – c.800). This would enable guidance counsellors to register with the TC as guidance counsellors in addition to the current requirement to be registered as teachers, and this would give some limited professional recognition and status to the guidance counselling profession at second level within the TC, as an interim measure, pending full implementation by the IGC of professional recognition.

The NE is also aware that FET and Adult Guidance Counsellors may not have the above professional recognition from the TC, so the IGC may also need to explore **interim** professional recognition for these members from a different organisation such as SOLAS, the ETBI, Legal & Professional Standards Office (prison service), etc.

Four recommendations

The following recommendations arose from the NE discussions on professionalism in guidance counselling in 2022. These recommendations were agreed by the PPWG in April 2023, and by the NE in May 2023. The NE decided to inform the wider membership of these recommendations by autumn 2023.

1: The NE recommends that the IGC should expand its capacity, role and range of functions and become a fully professional organisation. The NE agrees on the need to preserve the guidance counsellor's role and secure/protect the ethos of guidance counselling and the holistic approach to lifelong guidance in Ireland. The NE acknowledges that many essential professional structures to achieve this are already in place (e.g. initial training, CPD)

but acknowledges that more needs to be done. The NE recommends that the IGC should eventually aspire to have a regulatory function for guidance counsellors, but to achieve this, it recognises that there is a range of logistical and financial matters to take into consideration, not least the need for more staff, a larger premises, and consequently more funding.

2. The NE recommends that the IGC should take the necessary steps to have the qualifications of guidance counsellors legally defined, as is the case in 17 other CEDEFOP member countries (Barnes et al., 2020).

3: The NE recommends a single unitary structure within the IGC, despite the responsibility for guidance delivery having been split between two government departments – DE and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), as this would dilute the pursuit of professionalism. Most guidance counsellors have the same qualifications/training/skillset, and it was felt that a sectoral professional structure could prove divisive and might alienate members from one another. In addition, while the number of guidance counsellors working in the Further Education and Training (FET) and Adult Education areas is much smaller than the number working at second level, there is also some crossover, with some FET and Adult Education guidance counsellors working in second-level schools.

4: The NE recommends engagement with the NCCA and /or the DE Guidance Unit, under the Senior Cycle Review to cooperate in reviewing the Whole School Guidance Framework (2017) devised by NCGE for students in schools from 1st to 6th year, provided that:

- i) the guidance allocation is increased accordingly to account for any additional work involved in delivering such a guidance programme across all six years of second-level;
- ii) the time allocated for one-to-one guidance appointments is not reduced;
- iii) the distinction between guidance counsellor and subject teacher in schools is maintained.

Roles and functions of a fully professional IGC

The roles and functions of a fully professional IGC are listed below as a series of professional goals, which have been categorised as short-term, medium-term and long-term. **It is important to stress that these goals are neither exhaustive nor necessarily sequential.**

Short-term IGC professional goals (1-4 years)

- To engage in a series of PR campaigns, where the IGC communicates with school principals, teachers and the general public about the role of guidance counsellors, by liaising with organisations such as ACCS, ASTI, ETBI, ISSU, JMB, NAPD, NPCPP, Solas, TUI, etc. This motion has already been agreed at AGM 2023.
- To ensure that the initial guidance counsellor training courses continue to deliver qualifications that prepare guidance counsellors to provide safe and appropriate care, the IGC should engage in ongoing dialogue with the guidance course directors to ensure that course content continues to be relevant, up-to-date, and informed by best practice.
- To work with guidance course directors to establish a formal mentoring system for new guidance counsellors in their first year (as in Scotland), building on the innovative IGC webinars for new and not-so-new guidance counsellors.
- To formally engage with the new Guidance Unit in the DE to ensure that international programmes such as Academia and Euroguidance, formerly managed by NCGE, are made available to guidance counsellors in Ireland as a matter of urgency.
- To raise the profile, importance and necessity of ongoing CPD (at national and branch level) that will upskill the guidance counsellor, it is vital that this CPD be certified and of standardised quality across all IGC branches.
- To enable CPD to be recorded (and ultimately verified, if necessary), the NE should devise a secure online system, with strict IGC criteria to be met with regard to the CPD

included, as per the CPD document ratified by the NE in 2019. One model that could be explored by the IGC is that operated by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), where an automatic record of PDST-hosted CPD is maintained.

- To promote a set of recommended minimum agreed standards for members around records of client appointments, including content and storage (for legal reasons), to include personal counselling sessions.
- To design a support system that can be rolled out to guidance counsellors dealing with a critical incident in their workplace.
- To actively contribute to updating/revising the Whole School Guidance Framework (2017) for second-level schools (working with the NCCA under the Senior Cycle Review and /or the DE Guidance Unit).

Medium-term IGC professional goals (5-7 years)

- To contribute to the establishment of a repository of research into guidance counselling in Ireland, similar to the NICEC Journal in the UK, and online guidance counselling journals in smaller countries such as Iceland and the Nordic countries, so as to provide guidance counsellors with the opportunity to engage with research, to contribute to the evidence base which informs developing practice, and to enable guidance counsellors learn more about professional guidance practice in Ireland and abroad.
- To agree a set of benchmarks for guidance practice, similar to the CDI and Gatsby benchmarks in the UK, that guidance counsellors should meet, using the IGC Core Competencies (2016) document as a key reference point.
- To set up the required up-levelling organisational structure to deliver an elevated set of standards/benchmarks.
- To agree a Code of Professional Standards in addition to the existing IGC Code of Ethics (effectively a licence to practise).

- To maintain and publish a Register of Guidance Professionals who meet our standards which the public can consult.

Long-term IGC professional goals (8-10+ years)

- To agree a common understanding of the professional notions of “*ethical standards*”, “*negligence*” and “*fitness to practise*” within the NE / IGC through obtaining the necessary legal advice in the first instance.
- To explore any overlaps with the levels of protection already offered to some of our members, such as that provided by the TC, the teacher unions, etc.
- To set up an ethics sub-committee in order to devise a clear, transparent complaints procedure, in the event of negligence or malpractice.
- To agree and set up professional systems to deal with ‘*fitness to practice*’.

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