

# ‘Opening a Door’

EVALUATING THE BENEFITS OF  
GUIDANCE FOR THE ADULT CLIENT: A REPORT



**Regional Educational Guidance Service for Adults**  
Waterford Institute of Technology, Waterford March 2005

**Researcher: Lucy Hearne, B.A., H.Dip GC.**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The researcher wishes to thank the following for their contribution and invaluable assistance: the clients who responded to the survey, the present team and former staff of REGSA who have all contributed to the development of the service, all the pre-testers who provided feedback at the initial stage of design, Maeve O'Grady for her encouragement and guidance, and Waterford Institute of Technology for its ongoing support of the service.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3-4
Methodology	5-6
Findings of the Survey:	
(1) Quantitative Analysis	7-15
(2) Qualitative Analysis	15-20
Conclusion	21
Recommendations	22
References	24
Bibliography	25
Appendix	27

*'I never realised that doors could be opened  
until I had made contact with REGSA'*

## INTRODUCTION

This report is the result of a body of research carried out for the Regional Educational Guidance Service for Adults (REGSA) over a period of seven months. The purpose of the research was to evaluate the benefits of guidance for the adult clients accessing the guidance service. Therefore, the research has been client focused in terms of design, implementation and analysis. "Evaluative studies are those that appraise the value of [a service], they set out to measure how good [provision is]", (Abramson, 1979, p.10). In the context of guidance provision the focus here is on the clients' direct experiences of receiving information, advice and guidance and the outcomes for the client in terms of life changes and progression. The report includes the context of the study, the methodology used, findings from the data yielded, conclusions and recommendations. Due to time constraints, the analysis is determined by the most significant and informative results yielded, based on the aim of the study. It is recognised that a more in-depth longitudinal study would be highly valuable at some point in the future for further learning.

## CONTEXT

The Regional Educational Guidance Service for Adults has its origins in a New Start Project funded by Integra from 1996 to 1999 based in the Waterford Institute of Technology. In 1999, REGSA published a report entitled 'Looking for Something in the Dark; Educational Guidance Provision for Adults', that focused on current educational guidance provision in the South East, disadvantage caused by the lack of guidance for adults and the role of REGSA as a guidance service. The aim of the project is "to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults at risk of social exclusion through the establishment of an educational guidance service", (REGSA, 1999, p.5). REGSA was mainstreamed in 2000 as part of the Department of Education and Science's Adult Educational Guidance Initiative. "The initiative aims to support adults engaging in lifelong learning and to develop models of good community orientated practice. In particular, the initiative is assisting adults participating in second-chance education and others who would like to add to and improve their skills and competencies", (Dempsey, 2004, p.7). The remit of REGSA is to provide information, advice and guidance to adults in Waterford City and County with specific emphasis on disadvantaged target groups. The service has been carrying out this function very successfully for the last number of years.

However, it has been recognised by the service that since 2000 no formal system of tracking the progression of clients has been implemented and, to date, none has been requested on a national level by the Department of Education and Science. As a result it has been extremely difficult to ascertain how clients have benefited from guidance in terms of education and career progression. More often than not it has been on an ad-hoc and word of mouth basis (i.e. direct and indirect feedback on clients' progress). Therefore, at this stage, it is acknowledged that such developments are fundamental for the ongoing delivery of a quality guidance service and the establishment of professional best practice guidelines within the broader context of guidance provision. It is intended that the findings of this research will inform the future direction of REGSA through its development of a Strategic Plan.

## **ADULT GUIDANCE IN A BROADER CONTEXT**

"The primary purpose of educational guidance is to improve the match between learning opportunities and the needs and interests of learners and potential learners. This will include needs related to work (both paid and unpaid) and to personal development. Guidance can help clients, individually or in groups, to clarify their learning needs and find appropriate ways of meeting them", (Brown, 2003, p.1). As highlighted in the 1986 report 'The Challenge of Change' if we are to meet the needs of a life-long learning society in an ever changing economy the benefits of guidance for the adult client is of paramount importance. The Department of Education and Science's Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education (2000) recognises guidance as one of the "fundamental foundation blocks which must be put in place in building a comprehensive system of Adult Education within an overall framework of lifelong learning", (Dept. of Ed. & Science, 2000, p.19). While adult guidance is firmly established in the UK, Europe and abroad it is still in its infancy in Ireland by comparison. However, with the creation of the Adult Educational Guidance Initiative it is now at the forefront of provision for the adult client who wishes to reconnect with education, training and their own personal development. There are now 25 established guidance services operating in Ireland under the AEGI providing information, advice and guidance to adults.

It is also important to note that adult guidance is not just restricted to these established services. Education providers have seen a large increase in the number of adults accessing education and training at a number of levels including further and higher education. Guidance professionals working in a variety of education and training settings are now required to provide guidance to the adult client. Determining the benefits of guidance for adults and setting up systems of tracking for progression purposes will become increasingly important. This has already been highlighted in a recent OECD report on guidance provision in Ireland; "We need wider use of quality standards in guidance & guidance provision needs to be better informed by consumers of the service", (Sweet, 2004, p.5). In essence, best practice guidelines will need to be established within adult guidance provision in the very near future if we are to continue working for the betterment of our clients.

# METHODOLOGY

## LITERATURE REVIEW

At the outset, research was undertaken on methods of evaluating client progression. The research looked at; 4 guidance services in Ireland (Sligo, Kilkenny, DunLaoghaire and REGSA's own methods to date), 1 guidance service in Northern Ireland (EGSA), 1 guidance service in the UK (Cambridgeshire and Peterborough) and a current research study in Warwick Institute of Employment Research. The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Information, Advice and Guidance Partnership, which carried out a longitudinal study over a period of 4 to 5 years, researched the role guidance has played in the clients' lives. The Warwick Institute is researching 'What is Effective Guidance? Evidence from Longitudinal Case Studies in England' using case study methodology.

The above studies established that there appears to be a lack of consistent formal systems in place in the Irish guidance services to track clients. Instead services are creating their own systems, including REGSA, to determine the quality of provision. This is often on an ad-hoc basis depending on allocation of resources.

Different methods of evaluation were then looked at to determine the most appropriate system, including questionnaires, telephone tracking and case study methodology. It was agreed that a questionnaire was the most suitable based on the number of clients to be tracked and the time constraints involved. A questionnaire was designed that set out to evaluate the benefits for the clients who accessed the guidance service in 2001 and 2003. The questions were designed to yield both quantitative and qualitative results. These are reviewed in detail in the section 'Findings from the Survey'.

## IMPLEMENTATION

Before the final questionnaire was administered to the clients it was pre-tested with a sample group including; (i) previous clients, (ii) guidance practitioners and (iii) potential users of the data. Changes were then made and the completed questionnaire was administered with an accompanying cover letter to a sample group of clients.

### Breakdown of sample clients:

Total clients: 923

2001 = 334 All clients who accessed the service from 1/1/2001 - 31/12/2001

2003 = 589 All clients who accessed the service from 1/1/2003 - 31/12/2003

The two different years were chosen for a number of reasons; to highlight the increase of clients accessing the service, to establish comparisons between the two years in the data returns and to ascertain some element of longitudinal progression for the clients.

## DATA RETURNS

Initial returns yielded a 14% result and so it was decided to send out reminders to the clients who had not responded. As the survey was confidential and no system of coding was used on the initial questionnaire this resulted in sending out reminders to all the clients in the survey except for those who had replied and supplied their name at the end of the questionnaire. This proved to be time consuming and for future studies would need to be reviewed.

The reminders yielded further returns and the overall result has been 21.45%. The breakdown of completed questionnaire returns is set out below:

Returns for 2001 = 63 (18.86%)	Returns for 2003 = 135 (22.92%)
--------------------------------	---------------------------------

Postal returns (due to change of address or non residence):

Returns for 2001 = 21 (6.28%)	Returns for 2003 = 23 (3.9%)
-------------------------------	------------------------------

Aside from the results that were yielded in terms of completed questionnaires and the postal returns there were other results too. It emerged that clients had forgotten about accessing the service and got in contact again to find out more about the study. Postal returns were due to non-residency implying that people move location and are not available for tracking. A number of clients have emigrated and one former client is deceased. Finally, some clients who had difficulty with the understanding and content of the questionnaire contacted the service and needed assistance with the completion of it. Reviewing the design of the questionnaire from the feedback has been extremely beneficial as some clients had problems understanding it because of language difficulties (pre-dominantly non-national clients).

# FINDINGS OF THE SURVEY

This section of the report will concentrate on the analysis of the data yielded from the survey. It is divided into two sections: (1) analysis of quantitative results and (2) analysis of qualitative results. It was decided at the outset of the design of the questionnaire that it would be extremely important that both types of analysis would be used. While quantitative measurement provides valuable and immediate evidence of the effectiveness of the service it can fail to show the 'real' picture of the impact of the service on the clients' lives. Qualitative measurement is, therefore, necessary to capture the 'voice' of the client allowing him/her to express both positive and negative outcomes in a broader context.

## (1) QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The survey was sent to 923 clients and it is important to point out that the statistical analysis is based on the information supplied in the completed questionnaires. Furthermore, the analysis concentrates on the overall results of the two years combined, apart from the progression statistics. This is primarily due to time constraints as referred to previously.

### (I) PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

Set out below is the demographical information on the respondents; gender, age, nationality and educational level at time of first contact with the service.

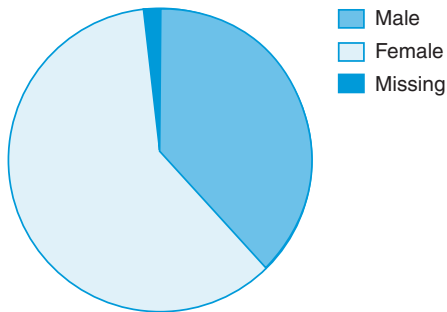


Chart 1. Gender

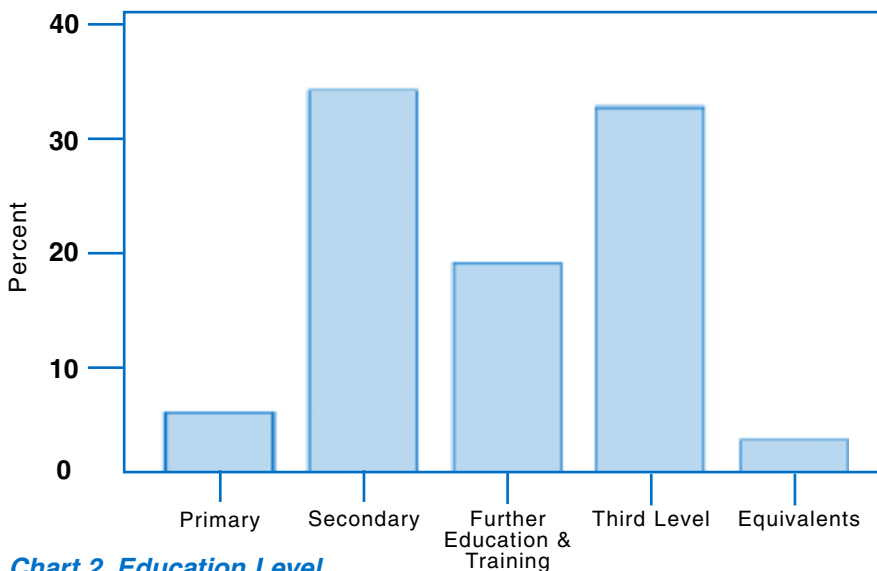
	Num	Age Dispersal
Answered:	193	Average Age: 38
Missing Data:	5	Youngest: 19
<b>Total</b>	<b>198</b>	Oldest: 67

Table 1. Age Dispersal

The information above in Chart 1 and Table 1 show that; (a) females form a higher percentage of clients who have responded to the survey (59.6%) as opposed to males (38.9%) and this would mirror the proportion of women to men accessing the service and (b) the average age of clients is the late thirties.

Nationality	Num	%	Nationality	Num	%
Irish:	166	83.8	Togolese:	1	0.5
British:	10	5.1	Albanian:	2	1.0
Welsh:	1	0.5	Ukranian:	1	1.0
French:	1	0.5	Kosovar:	1	0.5
Nigerian:	5	2.5	European:	1	1.0
Congoese:	4	2.0	American:	1	0.5
Cameroon:	1	0.5%	Missing Data:	3	1.5

**Table 2. Nationality**



**Chart 2. Education Level**

Table 2 above indicates that while there is a large spread of nationalities it is predominantly Irish adults who have availed of guidance and the educational level of clients on first contact as shown in Chart 2 has been mainly secondary and third level. It is important to note that question 8 asked for very general information on clients' educational levels on first contact, i.e. 'secondary' standard may range from only achieving first year to attaining a Leaving Certificate qualification. Consequently, this shows limitations in the question design and the information yielded for analysis. Finally, the 'equivalents' category was for non-Irish clients who may have an equivalent qualification from another country.

## ii) Provision required on initial contact with REGSA

The following three tables set out to show; (a) the type of provision required when the client made initial contact with the service, i.e. what the client needed guidance on, (b) the type of service availed of and (c) the quality of helped received.

<b>Guidance on:</b>	<b>Num</b>	<b>%</b>
Returning to education as an adult:	97	49
Education/training course options:	76	38.4
Mature Student 3rd level application:	54	27.3
Career Change:	69	34.8
Improving promotion prospects:	26	13.1
Seeking employment:	18	9.1
Funding supports:	21	10.6
Other:	9	4.5

*Table 3. Nature of guidance required*

The 'other' category in Table 3, and throughout the rest of the analysis, are individual responses to the question. Here it includes seeking guidance for; recreational purposes, disability support, self-improvement and post-graduate options.

<b>Type of service</b>	<b>Num</b>	<b>%</b>
Information only	38	19.2
Appointment/s with Guidance Counsellor	132	66.7
Both	28	14.1
Total	198	100

*Table 4. Type of service*

It is important to point out that Table 4 shows the results from 14.1 % of clients who indicated that they availed of 'both' information and a guidance appointment. The questionnaire did not have the 'both' category, and on reflection it would have been beneficial to have included this option. The purpose of having only two options was to separate the types of provision. However, the results show that the clients' perception is somewhat different and that for them, information and guidance are very much interlinked.

Quality of provision	Num	%
Clients who found (a) information only useful:		
Yes	73	36.9
No	8	4.0
Not applicable	117	59.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>100</b>
Clients who found (b) guidance appointment helpful:		
Yes	153	77.3
No	10	5.1
Not applicable	35	17.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 5. Quality of provision**

Table 5 shows the clients' feedback on usefulness of 'information only' provision and whether they found the 'guidance appointment' helpful. The 'not applicable' category refers to clients who availed of 'information only' and did not have a guidance appointment and vice versa.

### **(III) EXPERIENCE OF GUIDANCE**

Table 6 below reflects the different elements experienced by the client during the guidance session. The first two elements have yielded exactly the same result and this has been checked to ensure that there are no discrepancies. Possibly it bears evidence to the style of response when ticking boxes on a list of options, i.e. that these two were the first in the category, or maybe as evidence suggests that these two have been experienced more by the clients.

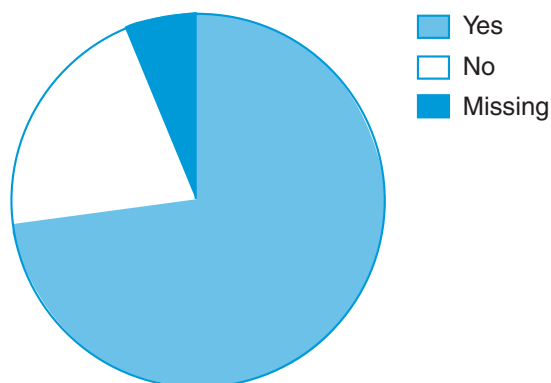
During guidance session clients experienced:	Num	%
Discussion of situation in a supportive environment	130	65.7
Exploration of various education/career options	130	65.7
Assessment of needs, abilities and areas of interest	112	56.6
Provision of information on available supports	47	23.7
Referral to other services	44	22.2
Support in their decision making	72	36.4
Assistance in planning a course of action	67	33.8
Other	11	5.6

**Table 6. Clients' experience of guidance**

The ‘other’ category of clients’ experiences in Table 6 includes; follow-up support on opportunities by post, assistance in applying for courses, advocacy with education providers, discussion of ideas and feedback, development of self-confidence to proceed further.

#### (IV) OUTCOMES FOR THE CLIENT ON ACCESSING REGSA

One of the key elements of evaluating the benefits of guidance is the possibility of outcomes for the client, i.e.; personal actions/changes and progression to the next level. Chart 3 and Tables 7 and 8 address the nature of change experienced and the barriers to change for the client. Section (v) deals with progression.



**Chart 3. Changes**

The above chart indicates that a very high percentage of clients have made changes since accessing the service (74.2%) and a lower percentage have not experienced changes (22.2%).

Types of Changes	Num	%
Returned to learning after number of years	70	35.4
Started suitable education/training course	84	42.4
Changed direction with new job/career	41	20.7
Found work suitable to needs and situation	24	12.1
Feel more self-confident	63	31.8
Now working towards a goal that is achievable	70	35.4
Other	12	6.1

**Table 7. Nature of Changes**

In Table 7 the ‘other’ category includes the following; developed self-awareness of abilities, now in final year of degree due to REGSA support, hoping to start own business, found suitable option for development of learning, found option never thought of before, signposted in suitable direction and will pursue when time is right, secured place on CE scheme as route into education (non-national), pursuing life dream, using the help received to help others in support services environment.

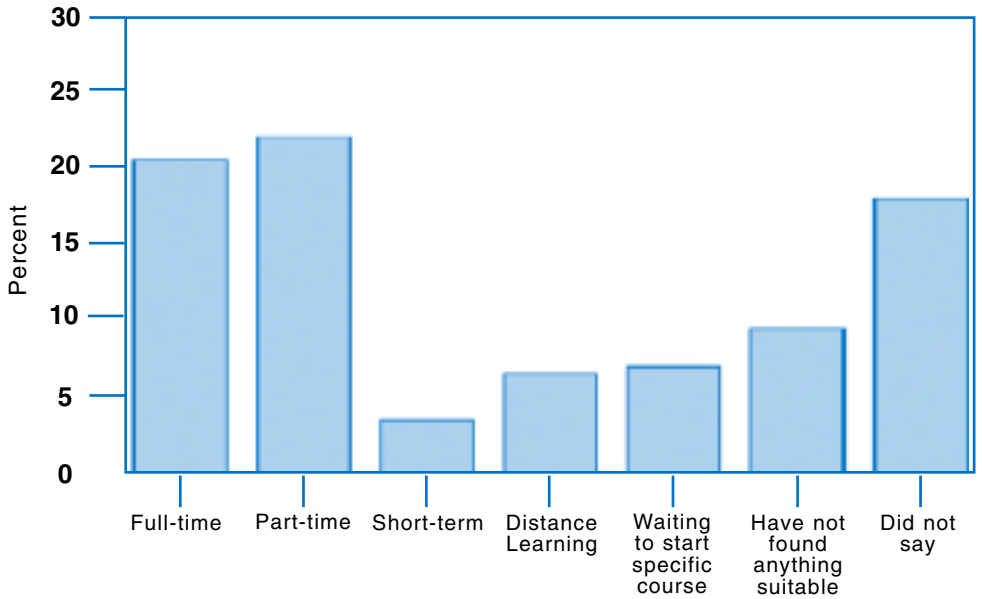
Barriers to Change	Num	%		Num	%
Financial	22	11.1	Family Commitments	16	8.1
Transport Difficulties	6	3.0	Lack of Childcare	9	4.5
Timing Inappropriate	16	8.1	Low self-confidence	5	2.5
Ineligible for course uptake	8	4.0	Other	18	9.1

**Table 8. Barriers to change**

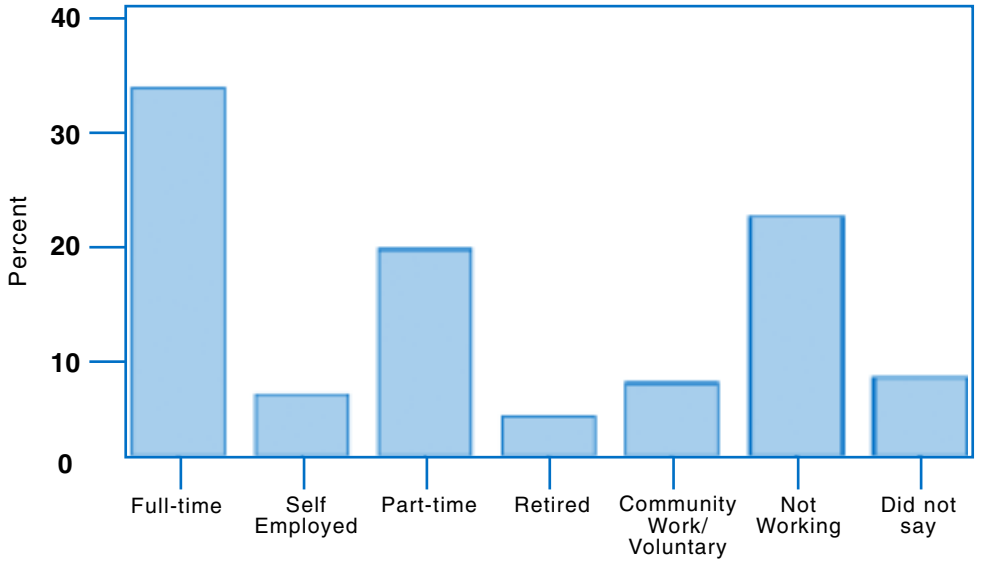
‘Other’ barriers to change for clients in Table 8 include; ill-health, not hearing back when course did not run, found suitable employment, still uncertain about which course to take, lack of suitable information, course not available in locality, disability issue, lack of English language skills, course did not run due to lack of numbers.

The learning gained from this particular section on ‘outcomes’ for the client is that making changes is not always a clear-cut scenario. While a very high percentage have indicated changes, a number of clients answered ‘yes’ and ‘no’, and this implies that it can be very hard to experience change as factors of everyday life can impinge on the process. For example; a client may have found a particular course suitable to his/her needs and because it does not run due to lack of numbers the client cannot progress any further. Consequently, if a client does not re-engage with the guidance service again to look at other options he/she may become disenfranchised. This would appear to confirm the need for regular monitoring of client progression on an ongoing basis.

Charts 4 and 5 below show the current status of clients at the time of completing the survey. The two main categories are (i) Education and (ii) Employment. Some clients also gave information in the ‘Other’ category (see below).



**Chart 4. (i) Current Education Status**



**Chart 5. (ii) Current Employment Status**

In Charts 4 and 5 the ‘not applicable’ figures relate to those who may be in some form of education and not working or those who may be in some form of employment and not in education. The ‘other’ category allowed clients to give more detail on their exact situation if they needed to. It includes; working from home, completion of course that was not suitable, progression from ECDL to post-graduate course, client working voluntary as first step, client now running a course himself, client has aspirations for further study but lack of financial support for part-time education, client started with training in English and computing before progressing to professional body training. This type of specific detail indicates that progression can be in small steps or large steps depending on the client’s situation.

<b>Clients ‘actions’ as a result of help from REGSA:</b>	<b>Num</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	112	56.6
No	67	33.8
Not applicable	1	0.5
Missing data	18	9.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 9. Actions**

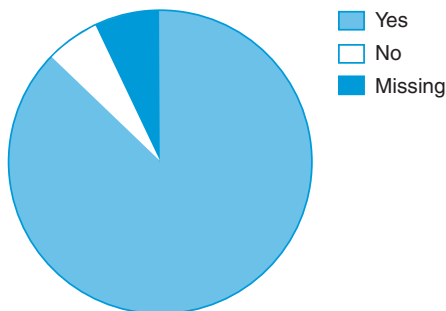
Table 9 above shows the response to the question whether ‘changes were as a direct result of help received from the service’. This is analysed further in Section 2 of this Chapter.

## **PROGRESSION ANALYSIS**

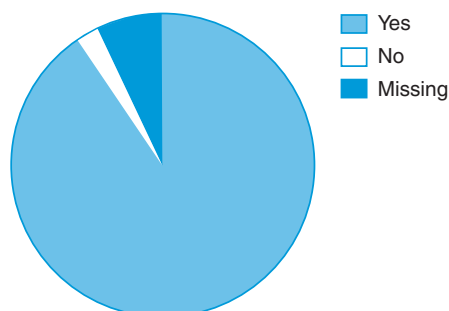
Progression statistics that were analysed manually from the information provided by clients in Question 9 of the survey can be found in Appendix 1. The purpose of this was to record the individual details of clients and keep track of their progression to date. As the vast majority of the clients provided their personal details (name and address) and gave consent to have the information updated on the service’s database it is possible to gauge a client’s progression path. However, this is time consuming in terms of analysis and database inputting, and it is recommended that for future tracking purposes other methods would need to be looked at. This is also another implication of doing a confidential survey for the service.

An important finding from the analysis above is the topic of ‘progression’ for clients. Responses have indicated that progression is very much an individual experience based on their own life experiences and expectations. This appears quite contradictory to the concept espoused by institutions and stakeholders in education who appear to require statistical measurement as evidence of progression outcomes.

The final part of the survey requested general feedback from the clients on the benefits of accessing the service and recommending it to others as shown in Charts 6 and 7 below. Comments and suggestions offered by the clients are discussed in Section 2 of this chapter.



**Chart 6.**  
***Benefits from accessing service***



**Chart 7.**  
***Recommendations to others***

To summarise, the statistical information analysed in this section covered the following areas; (i) profile of the clients, (ii) type and quality of provision accessed, (iii) client's direct experience of guidance, (iv) outcomes for the client and (v) general feedback for the service. The second part of this section will address the feedback from the clients in terms of themes that have arisen in the analysis.

## **(2) QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS**

Section A in this chapter dealt with the quantitative analysis of the findings from the completed questionnaires. In this section it is intended that a deeper understanding of the benefits of guidance for the adult will be met through the written feedback of the clients who were involved in the research. Certain themes emerged in this analysis and they are divided into the following categories; (1) Benefits, (2) Outcomes and (3) Comments and Suggestions.

### **1. BENEFITS FOR THE CLIENT**

The main focus of the research has been learning if the clients have benefited from receiving information, advice and guidance. The feedback has shown that the key benefits experienced have been in the following areas:

## **(I) PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Guidance as seen by the client is an empowering process allowing him/her the space to develop self-awareness and make decisions for the future. Many clients describe the experience in the following terms; increased motivation, realisation of potential, it challenged existing ways of thinking and one-to-one guidance helped with confidence building and decision-making skills. Having a clear sense of direction is important for adults and some clients see it as the start of a journey or having a vision of the future. For another client the most important aspect is being true to myself. Feelings of encouragement and affirmation are expressed by a client who needed reassurance at a particular point in life. Overall, the personal development of the client is one of the major benefits of guidance expressed in the feedback.

## **(II) ACCESS TO PROFESSIONAL EXPERTISE**

The second area that clients expressed a major benefit of guidance was the access to a trained professional who was non-judgmental and impartial. Having an opportunity to discuss a situation with a Guidance Counsellor is important for one client who needed to verbalise a problem in a confidential setting. Another factor that is highlighted is the Guidance Counsellor's knowledge of the education system and careers information. The ongoing support provided has been important for a number of clients in terms of; research and follow-up, being able to return for further guidance as part of the next step in the client's progression, knowing that the service is there when and if needed at a later date.

## **(III) INFORMATION PROVISION**

In an age when we are bombarded by information at every turn having access to relevant information and understanding it can be a major stumbling block for adults. One client points out that only for REGSA she would have been unaware of what is available. Clarity of information is vital for adults who need to know what direction to take and the feedback expresses this as a key factor in the decision-making process. While many clients have pointed out that the service has a huge range of information available breaking it down to fit the client's needs and circumstances is equally important. Finally one client expresses the benefits for her as follows; at the time I didn't change my direction in work, but recently I have, the information that I had received benefited me in the long-term. Some things people say to you stay with you and make sense at a later date.

## **(IV) SIGN-POSTING OF OPTIONS**

One of the key activities of guidance is the opening up of new options for the client. One client expresses it succinctly by saying I was pointed in the direction of third level education, which prior to the appointment I really hadn't thought about. For another client it was helpful

to go over options which might best suit may abilities. Clients also mention the use of the computerised guidance package as an important tool to provide new ideas and help clarify goals. Providing the client with new options enables him/her to explore areas never considered or known about before and this is another benefit of guidance for the client.

## **(V) APPROPRIATE REFERRAL**

The final benefit of guidance for the client has been the process of appropriate referral to other agencies as part of the support offered. One client gives a direct example of this by explaining other than the help with my full-time course I also found out about the adult learning centre which I use for spelling and computer classes which has helped me as well. For other clients referral and advocacy with employment agencies, educational institutions and financial support services has made a difference to their lives.

Overall, the research has shown that the vast majority of clients have experienced direct benefits from accessing guidance and only a very small amount have expressed no benefits.

## **2. OUTCOMES**

Making changes for the adult client is a key outcome of accessing guidance. However, as mentioned in Section 1 it is not always that easy. While there are many factors that can influence change there are many barriers that can prevent it. A large number of clients have experienced change for the better in their lives, many others are still in the process and there are some who have not for a variety of reasons.

### **(I) ACCESSING EDUCATION**

For adults, returning to education is often seen as a second chance opportunity and demands a huge amount of commitment and perseverance. Clients have expressed the need for encouragement to return and get a new qualification and how guidance provided that. For one client it is now time to fulfil a dream and for another it has finally enabled the client to study what he likes and know where he wants to work for his remaining work years. Educational guidance is seen as part of the step - by - step process to return to learning with the aim of retraining for a new career. A large number of clients are now at various stages of study from further education to the third level sector. It is important to note that clients have also expressed their reasons for returning and this varies considerably depending on the their needs, i.e. personal development, completing something that had been started earlier, new career options and new challenges.

## **(II) CAREER PROGRESSION**

The second major change expressed has been in the area of the client's career in terms of change, promotion and self-management. As mentioned above retraining and up-skilling is part of the process of career development. Taking action and making clear decisions on how to do this is a key factor in the client's progress. For one client who was concerned about his age and the length of time it would take to reach his goal the change started in 2001 and now in 2005 he will have a new qualification and new career. Clients have expressed the process of making informed decisions on career change with the help received from the service. One client in particular has described how she has taken a career break to explore new options for personal reasons and recognises that it will take time and commitment. For some clients the process of change takes time and may be hampered by life circumstances such as family commitments and institutional barriers. One client has decided with advice to try to get into teaching to suit family life while another client is not yet in a position to make a change because of family commitments but knows he can access the service in the future when he is ready. Another client decided to continue in full-time employment to secure funding and is now ready to change direction and plans to do so in January (2005).

Clients who have expressed no changes at all give a variety of reasons for this. One client has not found anything suitable to continue studying and another has not found anything suitable to improve his financial situation. Family commitments have prevented another client from making a change with the prospect of taking time out of study and falling behind a contributory factor in her decision. The experience of a non-national client who already has an equivalent third level qualification summarises how institutional barriers can have a major impact on change when he explains I would like to do a Masters or PhD but I've been advised that I couldn't according to my status, so I am doing what I can. Finally, while some clients have commented that they know the support is there if needed change can only happen if the client wants it to and sometimes he/she will decide not to pursue the direction I sought information on.

## **3. COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS**

In the final part of the survey the clients were given the opportunity to provide comments and suggestions on their experiences of accessing the service. From the information given it has been necessary to divide it into two key areas; (i) feedback directly related to accessing the service and (ii) feedback on their experiences of the education sector.

## **(I) GUIDANCE SERVICE PROVISION**

The clients' feedback on the service that REGSA provides is in the main very positive and instructive for future reference.

Clients have commented on the professionalism and friendliness of the staff in the service. However, many clients feel that the service needs to be promoted more through advertising, as they were not aware of its existence until they found it. A number of clients have suggested that it needs to be brought out into the broader community and would benefit from more networking with other statutory agencies. Clients from outside Waterford City and County express the need for an outreach service in their locality. It is clear from one client's comments that the distinction between REGSA and WIT is blurred when she suggests branching out into Kilkenny and including a [specific] course there. Extended opening hours, i.e. lunchtime and after 5 p.m., have been suggested a number of times while one client has commented that the office is never opened on the hours that it is supposed to be. Clients have made suggestions about the facilities such as making a reading room available and expanding into a bigger building as well as having more staff available. While some clients commend the amount of information at hand and the helpfulness of the staff other clients have commented on the appointment system. One client has suggested the need for improved waiting times for appointments and a number of clients have commented that they were never offered an appointment.

Clients have also made comments and suggestions on their experiences of the guidance process. One client comments that one session is not enough as it only scratches the surface and she would need at least two more sessions. Another client expresses the belief that once something is narrowed down for a person regarding where to start looking...it is a great help and less daunting. Two clients have made specific reference to the Guidance Counsellor's lack of knowledge of the world of work and employers' needs and another client has commented that the Guidance Counsellor was hugely unimpressed about his qualification. In relation to the computer guidance package one client feels that it was faulty in that the information it gave me related to expertise I had to date. Another client has expressed the belief that guidance is better geared to people seeking their main career area. However, one client comments that she has no hesitation in recommending the service as they were very helpful and knowledgeable on my particular field of interest (psychology) and provided plenty of info. Finally, one client has commented on the need for the service to be more aware of the impact of illness for the individual.

The need for the guidance service has been commented on a number of times in various forms; clients see it as an essential service, an important resource centre for up-to-date information when living in a rural community, and being aware of its existence if needed again. It is interesting to note that one client would not recommend it to friends or colleagues because of the stigma attached to counselling. A number of clients have suggested that the service needs to keep in touch with its clients by providing on-going contact through updated information relevant to their needs and follow-up on their educational progression.

This would appear to suggest that it is important for the clients that the service keeps track of their progression regularly.

## **(II) CLIENTS' EXPERIENCES OF EDUCATION**

Having the opportunity to provide feedback on their educational experiences has highlighted the need to inform providers of the barriers faced by adults who wish to re-engage with education. The following is a list of the comments and suggestions offered by the clients:

1. More funding needs to be made available for adult students, in particular, for distance education courses
2. Cancellation of courses due to lack of uptake can hold adults back from entering education
3. An easy pay facility for part-time courses to ease the financial pressure encountered by adults accessing part-time education would be beneficial
4. More childcare facilities need to be made available for adults returning to education
5. Input from college lecturers and course leaders would be helpful for adults making choices on courses to pursue
6. Assessment of mature students' abilities and appropriate learning support should be part of the process of entering third level education
7. Lobbying for a variety of home study courses with tutorials in college would be beneficial for adult students who cannot study full-time due to personal commitments
8. Ineligibility to enter education due to residency status and lack of social welfare entitlements is an institutional barrier that is holding adults back from learning

In summary, educational guidance may provide the client with a number of options to progress but too often it is the range of institutional barriers that prevent them from doing so. The qualitative analysis has given the clients the opportunity to voice their opinions and experiences of guidance and education that quantitative feedback does not allow. The following section will summarise the learning from the research and provide recommendations for the guidance service.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this research has been to evaluate the benefits of guidance for the adult client accessing the Regional Educational Guidance Service for Adults to determine quality of provision and strategic planning for the future. From the results of the research there are a number of key findings that need to be emphasised in relation to; guidance service provision, institutional barriers, the process of researching client progression and the development of quality systems for longitudinal tracking at a local and national level.

It is evident that the majority of clients who have availed of information, advice and guidance from REGSA have benefited enormously. The benefits have included; personal development, educational progression and enhanced career management. Through the feedback the clients have acknowledged the contribution that the service has made to their lives. Further analysis in the form of case studies of individual progression would reinforce these findings but, as explained earlier, time constraints do not allow for this.

For an adult, making life changes is a slow process and there are many barriers and obstacles to overcome as borne out by the experiences discussed in the study. Personal circumstances such as low self-esteem, family commitments, and financial concerns are just a number of the reasons why adults find it difficult to progress. Institutional barriers that include ineligibility to enter education, poor childcare services and lack of availability of flexible learning systems also hinder progression. Full recognition needs to be given to these difficulties if adults are to be encouraged to engage with the life-long learning process and to contribute to society.

The learning gained from the design and implementation of a survey to track the progression of clients has been invaluable. From the outset it became apparent that due to the numbers who have accessed the service since 2000 the use of a questionnaire was the most appropriate method for research purposes. Feedback has highlighted a limited amount of flaws in the design and implementation. However, the level of response and postal returns implies that clients; (i) move location regularly so this can pose enormous problems for tracking, (ii) they quite often forget having received help from the service, (iii) they can become confused between different organisations and (iv) a number of clients have the perception that REGSA is directly linked to WIT for provision and access.

Finally, with regard to the development of quality assurance systems to track the progression of clients it is evident that this needs to be addressed now. Clients have requested that they would like to be contacted regularly for updated information and support. In a recent NCGE News edition this issue was addressed with reference to the White Paper recommendation that "local agencies and institutions need to develop appropriate quality assurance systems".<sup>7</sup>

It discusses further the need for the incorporation of self-evaluation measures into a service's strategic/developmental plan that creates a culture of team planning and self-appraisal. The service's own report Looking for Something in the Dark mentions the setting up of a formal tracking system to monitor the progress of all clients on a six-monthly basis. To date this has not been implemented in the service nor in adult guidance provision nationally.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **CLIENT TRACKING**

Given the findings from the research and the recognition that the Regional Educational Guidance Service for Adults has made a major contribution to the educational and career progression of its clients it is evident that tracking is required at this point. In order to ensure consistency of contact and monitor progression it is recommended that the service develops and implements a system to measure outcomes on a regular basis. It is also recommended that quality systems for client tracking are developed nationally in adult guidance provision overall.

### **PROMOTION**

The service needs to promote itself regularly through advertising and networking with other agencies working with adults to maintain its profile as a major service provider within education. Furthermore, it needs to promote itself within broader community networks in Waterford City and County to target adults who are trying access education and training.

### **OUTREACH PROVISION**

The need for guidance on an outreach basis (i.e. neighbouring counties without services) has been requested by a number of clients in the survey. It is recognised that the remit of the service is the provision of guidance to adults within Waterford City and County and this may not be feasible. Over the coming months the AEGI proposes to implement Phase 4 of the guidance service and this may result in guidance provision developing in these areas that to date have been neglected.

### **PROFILE OF THE SERVICE**

The image of REGSA may need to be examined in terms of its relationship with the Waterford Institute of Technology. Evidence suggests that the public regularly misinterpret the provision of the service because of its locality to the Institute despite its remit that it is an independent and autonomous service. There may be a level of expectation from clients that the service has direct links with the Institute to guarantee access to education and if unsuccessful in gaining entry they are disappointed at the provision received.

## **FACILITIES**

While the facilities offered by REGSA provide a vast range of information and guidance, it is recommended that other methods of provision be examined also. Possibly, the development of a more user-friendly library, that allows clients to research information themselves. The results from this may be both beneficial for the client and the service. For the client it may allow for development of self-responsibility in finding information and for the service it may improve the waiting time for appointments. With regard to offers of an appointment it is recommended that client's are always made aware that the facility is available to them if they need it.

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

As the vast majority of clients have accessed the service to receive guidance on education and employment progression it is imperative that information is constantly updated. This includes the professional knowledge of the guidance staff who are empowering clients to make decisions. An awareness of educational qualifications and employment needs and opportunities is very important and clients have expressed their concerns about gaps in this area. This may mean more networking with agencies and providers in these sectors and ongoing professional development for the guidance staff.

## **ADVOCACY**

As the service's role is to be an independent and autonomous provider of guidance to adults who are marginalized and facing barriers in accessing education, it needs to be ensured that advocacy plays a vital role in its working relationship with other institutions and services. Regular feedback to educational providers and relevant stakeholders highlighting clients' issues and experiences needs to be maintained in order to provide a quality service to clients.

## **RESEARCH**

Finally, to date, there has been a dearth of analysis in the area of tracking and progression of adults in educational guidance provision in Ireland and so this research is both timely and highly relevant. Therefore, it is recommended that further research is needed on this topic for the future development of quality assurance systems for tracking and monitoring progression at a national level.

## REFERENCES

**Abramson J H (1979),**

*Survey Methods in Community Medicine; An Introduction to Epidemiological and Evaluative Studies (2nd ed.)*, Churchill Livingstone, New York.

**Brown J (2003)**

*The Challenge of Change; Developing Educational Guidance for Adults*, NAEGA Occasional Paper, Liverpool.

**Dempsey N (2004)**

*'Ministerial Address', Proceedings of Conference; Lifelong Guidance: Harmonising Policy and Practice*, Dublin.

**Department of Education and Science (2000)**

*Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education*, Dublin.

**NCGE News (2004)**

*What is the Matrix Standard?* Dublin.

**REGSA (1999)**

*Looking for Something in the Dark; Educational Guidance Provision for Adults*, A Report, Waterford Institute of Technology, Waterford.

**Sweet R (2004)**

*'Career Guidance and Public Policy: Is there a gap? What should we do about it? (OECD)', Proceedings of Conference; Lifelong Guidance: Harmonising Policy and Practice*, NCGE, Dublin.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Abramson, J.H (1979)**

*Survey Methods in Community Medicine; An Introduction to Epidemiological and Evaluative Studies (2nd ed.)*, Churchill Livingstone, New York.

**Baxter, L, Hughes, C & Tight, M (1996)**

*How to Research (2nd ed.)*, Open University Press, Buckinghamshire.

**Bimrose, J, Barnes, S, Hughes, D & Orton, M (2004)**

*Evaluating the Effectiveness of Guidance: Evidence from Longitudinal Case Studies in England*, Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick, Coventry.

**Brown, J (Autumn 2003)**

*The Challenge of Change; Developing Educational Guidance for Adults*, NAEGA Occasional Paper, Liverpool.

**Cambridgeshire and Peterborough IAG Partnership (2003)**

*The Value of Guidance for Adults*, Peterborough, UK.

**Department of Education and Science (2000)**

*Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education*, Dublin.

**Frazer, L & Lawley, M (2001)**

*Questionnaire Design and Administration; A Practical Guide*, Wiley Publ., New York.

**McNamara, G (1998)**

*Guidance in Adult and Continuing Education*, NCGE, Dublin.

**NCGE (2004) Proceedings of Conference;**

*Lifelong Guidance: Harmonising Policy and Practice*, Dublin.

**NCGE News (Autumn 2004)**

*What is the Matrix Standard?*, Dublin.

**OECD (2002)**

*Review of Career Guidance Policies; Ireland Country Note,*  
downloaded internet version.

**Pallant, J, (2001) SPSS Survival Manual;**

*A Step by Step Guide to Data Analysis Using SPSS (Version 10),*  
Open University Press, Buckinghamshire.

**REGSA (1999) Looking for Something in the Dark;**

*Educational Guidance Provision for Adults, A Report,*  
Waterford Institute of Technology, Waterford.

**REGSA (2000) A New Start:**

*Final Integra Project Report,*  
Waterford Institute of Technology, Waterford.

**Sussams, J.E (1998)**

*How to Write Effective Reports (3rd ed.),*  
Gower Publ., Hampshire.

## APPENDIX

## APPENDIX 1

### CLIENT PROGRESSION STATISTICS BREAKDOWN

The statistics below are a breakdown of the results shown in Table 12 and are based on the progression details supplied by the clients in the questionnaires at time of return (i.e. current status)

(A) 2001: Assessed 54 out of 63 clients who gave progression details on outcomes

#### (i) Education Breakdown:

##### Third level

Full-time =	14
Part-time =	9
Short-term =	2

##### Further Education

Full-time =	1
Part-time =	3
Short-term =	6

Distance Learning = 3

#### (ii) Employment Breakdown

Full-time employment =	10
Part-time employment =	2
Self-employed =	1
Not working =	3
Retired =	1

(B) 2003: Assessed 109 out of 135 clients who gave progression details on outcomes

#### (i) Education Breakdown:

##### Third level

Full-time =	19
Part-time =	20
Short-term =	1

Deregistered full-time students = 2

##### Further Education

Full-time =	7
Part-time =	12
Short-term =	0

Distance Learning = 11    Waiting to start specific course = 3

#### (ii) Employment Breakdown:

Full-time employment =	23
Part-time employment =	20
Self-employed =	7
Not working =	10
Not working (ill health)	3
Retired =	2
Voluntary/community work	8

	2001 clients	2003 clients
Fulltime Third level Education	25.9%	17.4%
Fulltime Employment	18.3%	21.1%

# APPENDIX 2

## REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL GUIDANCE SERVICE FOR ADULTS

### Client Survey

Please answer the following questions appropriate to your situation

- Q.1. Please state your:**
- (a) Gender; Male  Female
  - (b) Date of birth; \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_
  - (c) Nationality; \_\_\_\_\_

**Q.2. What help were you looking for when you first contacted REGSA?**  
(You may tick more than one box here)

**Guidance on:**

- |  |                          |   |                          |
|--|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| (a) Returning to education as an adult   | <input type="checkbox"/> | (b) Education/<br>training course options | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (c) Mature Student 3rd level application | <input type="checkbox"/> | (d) Career change                         | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (e) Improving promotion prospects (work) | <input type="checkbox"/> | (f) Seeking employment                    | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (g) Funding supports (e.g. grants)       | <input type="checkbox"/> | (h) Other.....                            | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**Q.3. What type of service did you avail of from REGSA:**

- (a) Information only (e.g. by email, post, call-in)
- (b) Appointment/s with a Guidance Counsellor

**Q.4. If you received (a) Information only did you find it useful:**

- Yes  No

Please explain:.....  
.....

**Q.5. If you had (b) appointment/s with a Guidance Counsellor do you believe it helped you?**

- Yes  No

Please explain:.....  
.....

**Q.6. During the guidance appointment/s did you have the opportunity to experience any of the following:**

(You may tick more than one box)

- (a) Discussion of your situation in a supportive environment
- (b) Exploration of various education/career options available
- (c) Assessment of your needs, abilities and areas of interest
- (d) Provided with information on supports available
- (i.e. funding, childcare, learning)
- (e) Referral to other services that helped you
- (f) Supported in your decision making
- (g) Assisted in planning a course of action
- (h) Other (please describe).....

**Q.7. Have you been able to make changes as a result of the information, advice or guidance you received from REGSA?**

Yes  No

If the answer is Yes,  
please tick any of the following actions you have undertaken:  
(You may tick more than one box)

- (a) Returned to learning after a number of years
- (b) Started suitable education/training course
- (c) Changed direction with new job/career
- (d) Found work suitable to your needs and situation
- (e) Feel more self-confident
- (f) Now working towards a goal that is achievable
- (g) Other (please specify).....

If the answer is No, was it because of any of the following:  
(You may tick more than one box)

- (a) Finances  (b) Family Commitments
- (c) Transport difficulties  (d) Lack of childcare facilities
- (e) Timing inappropriate  (f) Not feeling confident enough yet
- (g) Not eligible to take up course  (h) Other (please specify)

.....  
.....

**Q.8. When you first contacted REGSA what was your education level at that point?**

(e.g. primary, secondary, further education or training, third level, or equivalents)

.....

**Q.9. Please tell us about your current situation:**

(You may tick more than one box)

**(i) Are you Studying/Training?**

Full-time      Course.....College/Centre.....

Part-time      Course.....College/Centre.....

Short-term      Course.....College/Centre.....

Distance Learning/Home study  Course.....  
Course Provider.....

Waiting to start specific course  Have not found anything suitable

.....

**(ii) Are you Employed?**

Fulltime  Part-time  Community work/voluntary

Self-employed  Retired  Not working

.....

**(iii) Other (please specify)**

.....

.....

**Q. 10 Did any of the above actions (Q.9) result from decisions made after receiving help from REGSA?**

Yes

No

Please comment if you wish to do so.....

.....

**Q.11. Overall, do you feel you benefited from accessing the Regional Educational Guidance Service for Adults?**

Yes  No

Please explain.....  
.....

**Q.12. Would you recommend REGSA to a friend or colleague?**

Yes  No

Comments.....  
.....

**Q.13. Have you any thoughts, comments or suggestions on how we could improve our service for the benefit of our clients?**

.....  
.....  
.....

*Thank you for taking the time to answer our questions. We may, at some time in the future, do follow-up case studies on the feedback received.*

- (i) If you would like to be included in further research please tick box and supply details below*
- (ii) If you would like your records updated on our database please tick box and supply details below*
- (iii) If you would like further information or guidance please tick box and supply details below*

*Otherwise if you wish to remain anonymous you do not need to supply name and address below.*

Name.....

Address.....  
.....

Contact Tel. No.....

Notes...

Notes...

