

The Senior Cycle in Second-Level Schools



The Senior Cycle in Second-Level Schools

A three-year senior cycle has been available as an option for second-level schools since September, 1994. The programmes available at senior cycle comprise:

- **Transition Year**
- **Established Leaving Certificate**
- **Leaving Certificate Applied**
- **Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme**

The aims of the senior cycle are to encourage and facilitate students to continue in full-time education during the post-compulsory period by providing a range of programmes suited to their abilities, aptitudes and interests.

The objectives of the senior cycle are to develop each student's potential to the full and to equip him or her for further education or training, or for the world of work. Senior cycle programmes are designed to provide for the holistic development of students by fostering in them a sense of self-esteem, self-reliance and innovation so that they are adequately prepared for active involvement in the social, cultural and economic future of society.

Students may spend up to three years in the senior cycle. Some students complete a one-year Transition Year before starting a two-year Leaving Certificate programme. Others begin a two-year Leaving Certificate programme immediately after completing the junior cycle.

Transition Year

1. What is the Transition Year?

The Transition Year is available to students after they have completed the Junior Certificate programme and before they begin one of the three Leaving Certificate programmes. It is an optional year.

2. Does the Transition Year have a fixed curriculum?

The Transition Year does not have a prescribed national curriculum. Each school designs its own programme according to a recommended curriculum framework laid down by the Department of Education and Science. Each individual school should have an up-to-date Transition Year programme document that defines the school's curriculum for the year. This should reflect the stated aims of Transition Year which are:

- *education for maturity with an emphasis on personal development including social awareness and increased social competence;*
- *the promotion of general, technical and academic skills with an emphasis on interdisciplinary self-directed learning;*
- *education through experience of adult and working life as a basis for personal development and maturity.*

Each school takes account of students' needs, the school's vision for its students and the resources available in designing its Transition Year programme.

3. Are Transition Year programmes inspected by the Department of Education and Science?

Transition Year programmes are inspected by Department of Education and Science inspectors, just as other areas within the curriculum are inspected. The function of the inspectorate is to evaluate and support the implementation of the programme in schools.

4. What are the main benefits of taking the Transition Year?

A significant benefit to the student is the space provided by the year to grow and mature during a sensitive and key stage of transition from adolescence into young adult life.

Through encountering a broad range of learning experiences in an environment free from high-stakes examinations, students acquire skills, competencies and attitudes that, otherwise, they may not have opportunities to develop.

5. Does taking Transition Year make it more difficult for a student to settle into a Leaving Certificate programme?

Research has shown that students who had chosen the Transition Year option achieved better results in the Leaving Certificate examination than those who had not taken the option. This was particularly the case for students who came from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Students' better performance in the Leaving Certificate examination appears to be due to greater maturity, increased growth in confidence and overall sense of responsibility, the benefits accruing from an additional year's study, extra time to reflect on subject choice and more informed choices as a result of being able to sample a variety of subjects before making decisions.

6. What are the main features of a Transition Year programme?

A Transition Year programme consists of four areas of study/activity as follows:

- *Core subjects:* these are subjects such as Irish, English, mathematics and physical education which are taken by students throughout post-primary school. Core subjects are taught for the full duration of Transition Year.

- *Sampling subjects*: these subjects are included to give students opportunities to experience a range of subjects so that they can select their Leaving Certificate subjects in a more informed way. For example, schools could decide to offer three science subjects to Transition Year students. Equally, they could provide the three business subjects or they could focus on a wide range of practical subjects.
- *Transition Year modules*: these modules provide students with opportunities to develop important life skills. They tend to cover areas such as computer skills, first aid, self-defence, personal development, car mechanics and interior design.
- *Calendar events*: these are learning experiences which aim to challenge the students' practical and personal skills as well as giving them opportunities to develop their sense of responsibility. They normally take place over a short concentrated period of time, once or twice per year. They can take the form of work experience, community work, mini-companies and challenging tasks within the school such as the publication of newsletters, the organisation of a parents' evening or the staging of a play or musical.

7. Are there exams at the end of Transition Year?

All students who have successfully completed the Transition Year are awarded a Transition Year certificate. This certificate is issued jointly by the Department of Education and Science and the school. In addition, students may receive school-based certificates to mark their achievements in specific areas within the Transition Year programme such as computer studies, first aid and self-defence. Students are assessed continuously throughout the year and also, at the end of each term. A wide variety of modes of assessment and of assessment criteria are used. It is recommended that portfolio assessments/interviews are carried out at the end of Transition Year.

8. Do students get homework during the Transition Year?

Yes, homework is an important part of the Transition Year. In addition to traditional styles of homework, students are expected to do projects, assignments, interviews and research. Transition Year homework may involve hours spent after school arranging work experience, editing a school newsletter, rehearsing lines for a play or visiting the elderly as a component of work in the community.

9. Is there a role for parents in the Transition Year?

Yes, schools are encouraged to involve parents in the planning, delivery and evaluation of the programme. Newsletters, reports and parents' meetings ensure that parents are well informed about the progress of their daughter or son in Transition Year.

10. Is the Transition Year available in every school?

Just over 70% of schools currently provide a Transition Year programme as part of their curriculum. In some of these schools, it is school policy that all students take the programme. In others, it is taken by a selection of the students.

Leaving Certificate Programmes

Each Leaving Certificate programme is two years in duration.

There are three separate Leaving Certificate programmes:

- **The Established Leaving Certificate (LC)**
- **The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)**
- **The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP)**

The Established Leaving Certificate (LC)

The majority of senior cycle students take the established Leaving Certificate. Achievement in the Leaving Certificate examination is the basis upon which places in third level institutions are allocated. There are written terminal examinations for all subjects along with oral and aural examinations for Irish (Gaeilge) and modern languages. Practical tests and project work form part of the assessment of some subjects.

Students taking the established Leaving Certificate programme must take at least five subjects, of which one must be Irish. Typically, students take six or seven subjects. Subjects can be taken at higher and ordinary levels. In addition, foundation level courses are available in Irish and in mathematics.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) carries out a rolling review of the syllabi for Leaving Certificate subjects and new subjects are introduced, as appropriate.

- A revised syllabus in English was introduced in 1999, for first examination in 2001.

- Revised syllabuses in chemistry and physics were introduced in 2000, for first examination in 2002.
- A new syllabus in Russian was examined for the first time in 2003.
- Revised syllabuses in biology and home economics were introduced in 2002, for first examination in 2004.
- An interim syllabus in Arabic and a new syllabus in Japanese will be examined for the first time in 2004.
- A new syllabus in religious education will be examined for the first time in 2005.
- Revised syllabuses in history and in geography will be introduced in September 2004, for first examination in 2006.

In addition to updating the content and relevance of syllabuses, the NCCA has been requested to increase, where possible, the vocational orientation of each subject. This is to ensure that subjects in the established Leaving Certificate are relevant to the changing needs of students.

Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)

1. What is the Leaving Certificate Applied?

The Leaving Certificate Applied is a distinct, self-contained two-year Leaving Certificate programme aimed at preparing students for adult and working life. It was introduced in 1995. It is a person-centred course involving a cross-curricular approach rather than a subject-based structure.

The programme emphasises excellence in a broad range of achievements. It is innovative in the *way* students learn, in *what* they learn and in *how* their achievements are assessed. The programme is characterised by educational experiences of an active, practical and student-centred nature.

2. What is different about the Leaving Certificate Applied?

The Leaving Certificate Applied differs from other Leaving Certificate programmes in terms of structure, design, content, teaching methodologies and assessment. It focuses on providing for the development of students' understanding, self-esteem, self-knowledge and their sense of responsibility. The programme is designed to allow students opportunities to apply their learning and experiences over the two years of the programme to practical educational tasks at school, in the workplace and in the wider community.

3. Who would benefit most from Leaving Certificate Applied?

The Leaving Certificate Applied is intended to meet the needs of those students who are not adequately catered for by other Leaving Certificate programmes or who choose not to opt for such programmes.

4. What is the advantage of Leaving Certificate Applied?

The advantage of Leaving Certificate Applied is that it focuses on the talents of individual students and helps them to apply their learning to the reality of their lives. The two-year programme consists of four half-year sessions and achievements are credited in each of these sessions.

5. What kind of courses are offered?

In the Leaving Certificate Applied, courses are offered in three main areas:

Vocational Preparation

Work experience is essential to this element of the programme. Students are prepared for adult and working life through a range of courses and modules including English and communication, guidance, job-search, work experience, enterprise, community work, work and living.

Vocational Education

All students take a course in mathematical applications and an introductory course to information and communication technology. They also choose two specialist courses from the following career-related areas:

- active leisure studies
- agriculture/horticulture
- childcare/community care
- craft and design
- graphics and construction studies
- engineering
- hair and beauty
- hotel, catering and tourism
- information and communications technology
- office administration and customer care
- technology.

General Education

Students experience a broader dimension to their education through courses in arts education, Gaeilge, modern languages/sign language, leisure and recreation, and social education. They can also take approved elective courses such as religious education and science. Or, they can choose additional modules from a suite of modules and courses available in the programme.

6. How are Leaving Certificate Applied courses designed?

Each course consists of a number of modules. A module generally represents half a year's work and is designed to take a minimum of 30 hours to complete.

7. What kind of assessment is involved in Leaving Certificate Applied?

The Leaving Certificate Applied assessment takes place over the two years under three headings:

- *satisfactory completion of modules;*
- *performance in student tasks;*
- *performance in the final examinations.*

Credits or marks are awarded for each of these three areas.

Satisfactory Completion of Modules

At the end of each session, a student is credited on satisfactory completion of the appropriate modules. Students can claim credits if they have 90% attendance for the module and have completed a specified number of key assignments essential to the module.

This method of assessment provides students with short-term and immediate-term incentives. It is specifically designed to increase students' motivation and to ensure their participation in the modules on an on-going basis. Thirty one per cent of Leaving Certificate Applied credits are allocated to satisfactory completion of modules.

Student Tasks

Each student is required to complete seven *student tasks* over the two years. Tasks are assessed at the end of each session by external examiners appointed by the Department of Education and Science. For six of the seven tasks, this assessment includes an individual student interview. These tasks may be in a variety of formats – written, audio, video, artefact etc. Each student is also required to produce a report on the process of completing the task. The seven tasks involved are as follows:

- general education task
- vocational preparation task
- two vocational education tasks
- contemporary issue task
- practical achievement task
- personal reflection task.

Thirty five percent of Leaving Certificate Applied credits are allocated to student tasks.

Final Examinations

A final examination must be taken in each of the following areas:

- English and communication
- two vocational specialisms
- mathematical applications
- language (Gaeilge chumarsáideach and a modern European language)
- social education.

Leaving Certificate Applied final examinations are organised by State Examinations Commission as part of the timetable for Junior and Leaving Certificate Examinations. They include written, oral and practical components. Thirty four percent of Leaving Certificate Applied credits are allocated to performance in the final examinations.

8. Do Leaving Certificate Applied Students receive a Leaving Certificate?

Yes. Students who successfully complete the programme will receive a Leaving Certificate from the Department of Education and Science. All credits awarded will be recorded on the Leaving Certificate Applied parchment.

This certificate is awarded at three levels:

Pass	120-139 credits	60% - 69%
Merit	140-169 credits	70% - 84%
Distinction	170-200 credits	85% - 100%

Candidates who acquire less than 120 credits receive a Record of Experience. Students who do not complete the full programme also receive a Record of Experience.

9. Where is the Leaving Certificate Applied available?

Leaving Certificate Applied is being offered to young people and adults in a range of schools/centres throughout the country.

10. Upon successful completion of Leaving Certificate Applied, can a student continue in further education and training?

Yes. The Leaving Certificate Applied is accepted for most Post-Leaving Certificate Courses (PLCs). Successful completion of PLC courses may allow a student to progress to third level education at an institute of technology. The Leaving Certificate Applied is acceptable for access to most apprenticeships.

11. Can a Leaving Certificate Applied student proceed to third level education?

Direct access to third level education through the CAO system is not possible immediately after completing the Leaving Certificate Applied programme.

Leaving Certificate Applied graduates may proceed to Post-Leaving Certificate courses (PLCs), which are usually of one year's duration. After obtaining a FETAC Level 2 award on a PLC, it is possible for students to progress to third level certificate courses in the institutes of technology through the Higher Education Links scheme.

12. Can a Leaving Certificate Applied student enter a FÁS apprenticeship Course?

FÁS accept Leaving Certificate Applied as a qualification for entry to standards-based apprenticeships.

A full list of apprenticeships courses is available from FÁS offices nationwide.

13. Are employers aware of LCA?

Yes. The LCA programme places particular emphasis on preparation for the world of work and students who complete the programme satisfactorily are recognised by a wide range of employers as being eligible to apply for many career vacancies in their organisations. The Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) and the Irish Small and Medium Employers (ISME) have strongly endorsed the Leaving Certificate Applied as a programme that successfully prepares young people for working life and is well tuned to the future needs of the labour force.

Glossary

Ref 1. *Vocational specialism* is a practical course which aims to introduce the student to skills, attitudes and practices related to certain career areas.

Ref 2. *Credits*: A maximum of 200 credits can be accumulated over the two years under three headings:

■ satisfactory completion of modules	62 credits	(31%)
■ student tasks	70 credits	(35%)
■ final examinations	68 credits	(34%)

Ref 3. The *student task* is a unique feature of the LCA. This is a practical activity which provides students with the opportunity of applying the knowledge and skills acquired through the various courses. Students complete seven such tasks in the course of the two years.

Ref 4. *Further education* refers to vocational education and training (outside the third level sector) and to adult and continuing education.

Ref 5. *Post-Leaving Certificate Courses (PLCs)* can be one or two years in duration. Their objective is to provide skills to meet the needs of the economy, to equip young people with the vocational and technological skills necessary for employment and/or progression to further education and training.

Ref 6. *FETAC Awards* The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) now makes awards formerly made by NCVA, FÁS, CERT/NTCB, Teagasc and BIM. FETAC therefore continues to make awards in art, craft, design, business and administration, science, technology and natural resources, services, leisure and tourism, communications, general studies and performing arts.

FETAC Level 2 awards are generally achieved upon completion of one-year full-time Post-Leaving Certificate courses. Some are part-time programmes, which allow for the building of credits over time. Assessment is rigorously monitored and moderated by FETAC, thus ensuring national standards. These awards are now part of the emerging national qualifications framework, and create opportunities for progression to further and higher education and training, and to employment.

Ref 7. *Third level education* refers to the universities, the colleges of education and the institutes of technology. Universities are essentially concerned with undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes, together with basic and applied research. The main work of the institutes of technology is in certificate and diploma programmes, with a number of degree programmes, and in applied research.

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP)

1. What is the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme?

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is best described as a Leaving Certificate with a strong vocational dimension. It provides students with opportunities to realise their potential for self-directed learning, for innovation and for enterprise.

2. Why was it introduced?

The LCVP was introduced in response to the changing needs of Ireland's education system and to the changing work and business environment. The programme aims to prepare students for a world where the ability to cope with rapid change is of increasing importance in preparation for social and economic life.

3. What do students study on the LCVP?

LCVP students must take at least *five* Leaving Certificate subjects. One of these subjects must be Irish. Typically, LCVP students take between five and seven Leaving Certificate subjects, plus the link modules.

The core of the LCVP includes the following elements which students must take:

- two Leaving Certificate subjects from one of the designated vocational subject groupings;
- a Leaving Certificate modern European language (other than Irish or English) *or* a vocational language module;
- two link modules on enterprise education and preparation for the world of work.

The link modules are designed to be combined flexibly with each other and should be closely integrated with the vocational subjects taken by the student.

So, for example, a typical LCVP student might study business and home economics as the two subjects from the subject groupings. He/she might study French and Irish as languages. If he/she is studying six Leaving

Certificate subjects in total he/she might then also take English and mathematics. In addition, he/she would be required to take the two link modules.

4. What value is the LCVP to a student going to third level?

LCVP students have the same opportunity to proceed to third level education as students of the established Leaving Certificate. Within the CAO system, all third level institutions have agreed to accept the link modules for points on the following basis:

Pass	30 points
Merit	50 points
Distinction	70 points.

5. How is the LCVP different from the established Leaving Certificate?

The LCVP strengthens the vocational dimension of the Leaving Certificate by linking subjects into vocational groupings from which students must choose. In addition, the two link modules sharpen the vocational focus of other subjects taken by students. The vocational dimension raises students' awareness of, and prepares them for, the world of work and further study. The activities of the link modules are closely integrated with learning in relevant Leaving Certificate subjects.

6. In what ways will students benefit from taking the programme?

Students who take the LCVP benefit in several ways. Through the programme's focus on *personal development* students are better able to:

- communicate their thoughts and ideas effectively;
- take responsibility for their own learning;
- work as a member of a team or group;
- adapt and cope with changing circumstances.

Through the programme's focus on the *World of Work*, students:

- gain knowledge of the world of work;
- acquire skills for job-seeking;
- complete a career investigation;
- undertake work experience or participated in work shadowing.

Through the programme's focus on *Enterprise Education* students are:

- more innovative and enterprising;
- familiar with setting up and running enterprising initiatives;
- experienced in using computers and audio-visual equipment.

7. What is the difference between a subject and a module?

A module can be described as a self-contained unit of study on a particular topic or theme. A module is usually combined flexibly with other modules leading to certification. This is the case with the LCVP where the two link modules are combined for the purposes of assessment and certification by the Department of Education & Science. Generally, less time is given to covering a module than would be given to a full Leaving Certificate subject. For example, the two LCVP link modules take a total of 2 to 3 class periods per week compared with a Leaving Certificate subject which generally takes 4 to 5 class periods per week.

8. How much extra study is involved in the link modules?

The link modules are activity-based so there is little extra formal study. However, the activities involved in the link modules – for example, the organisation and running of mini-enterprises, visits to community and business enterprises, investigations of the local community – do take time and some of these activities extend outside the school hours. Evaluation is an integral part of all LCVP activities.

9. How are the link modules examined?

The link modules are assessed and certified by the Department of Education and Science. The assessment consists of two elements:

I. Written examination (40% of marks)

Content:

Section A: Audio-visual presentation

Section B: Case-study (received in advance by students)

Section C: General questions (4 out of 6)

II. Portfolio of coursework (60% of marks)

Content:

Section I: Core items

- curriculum vitae;
- career investigation;
- summary report;
- enterprise/action plan.

Section 2: Optional items (2 out of 4)

- diary of work experience;
- enterprise report;
- recorded interview/presentation;
- report on My Own Place.

LCVP students receive the same certificate as established Leaving Certificate students. In addition, their certificates include a statement of the results of the assessment of the link modules on the basis of pass, merit or distinction.

10. What are the subject groupings?

The subject groupings aim to link regular Leaving Certificate subjects into groupings which, when taken by the students, give them special insights into a particular vocational area. For example, students taking the subject grouping of home economics and business combined with their study of the link modules should gain special insights into the tourism and catering business and general understanding of the services sector of industry.

There are two types of vocational subject groupings:

1. Specialist groupings – subjects which naturally complement one another, for example accounting and business, or engineering and technical graphics.
2. Services groupings – subjects which complement one another in a commercial context, for example agricultural science and business.

11. What do employers think of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme?

Employers are very enthusiastic about the LCVP. For many years, employers have felt that the education system did not prepare students well enough for the world of work. In a rapidly changing, increasingly technological world, employers feel more than ever the need for employees to be well educated in the broadest sense - adaptable, multi-skilled, good communicators, capable of making decisions and potential lifelong-learners. The LCVP contributes to meeting these needs.

Glossary

Ref 8. *Link modules:* Students take two link modules, or short courses, as part of the LCVP. These are enterprise education and preparation for the world of work. Each module covers an area of experience which is important in preparing students for life after second-level schooling. The reason the work “link” is used to describe these modules is that the content of each of the modules has close links with the other. In addition, teachers are expected to make links between what students are learning through these modules and what they are learning through their other Leaving Certificate subjects, particularly those of the subject groupings they have chosen.