An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
REPORT

Coláiste Iosagáin
Portarlington, Co. Laois
Roll Number: 68068R

Date of inspection: 31 March 2011
EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE VOCATIONAL PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) in Coláiste Íosagáin, Portarlington. It presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for the further development of the programme in the school. During the evaluation, the inspector held meetings with the school principal, a core group of teachers and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector liaised extensively with the programme co-ordinator and visited classrooms to observe teaching and learning. The inspector provided oral feedback to teachers on lessons observed. The inspector also examined students’ work and reviewed relevant documentation pertaining to the programme, as well as teachers’ written preparation. The outcomes of the evaluation were discussed with the deputy principal, the programme co-ordinator and the core team following the evaluation. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The LCVP has been part of the curriculum in Coláiste Íosagáin since the school was established in 2000, following the amalgamation of two pre-existing voluntary secondary schools. One of these schools had previously offered the LCVP for a number of years.

The LCVP is competently managed and implemented by a core team of three teachers, assisted by a programme co-ordinator. Members of this team have a wide range of expertise and experience and subjects taught include business subjects, Construction Studies and Music. All members of the core team take link module classes. There are two LCVP class groups in each of fifth and sixth year and while the link module teacher of each group effectively co-ordinates that group, one teacher takes overall responsibility for co-ordination.

Continuing professional development (CPD) has been well supported by senior management and extensively availed of by the members of the core team. A very good relationship exists amongst the team members, which is characterised by mutual support and collaboration. The members of the core team are motivated, enthusiastic and committed to implementing the programme to the highest standards.

Each LCVP class group is allocated one double period each week for link module lessons. Life skills and Physical Education are on the same option line as the link modules. Additional English and Mathematics classes have been added to this option line recently and it is proposed to include Applied Mathematics in the coming school year. These changes have the effect of reducing access to the LCVP for specific groups of students. It is recommended that the school re-examines this timetabling arrangement, subject to stated priorities, to ensure that student choice is not reduced and to ensure that students’ needs are being met. In this context, consideration should be given to the provision of additional class-contact time in fifth year, subject to resources. In order increase access to the LCVP, it is further recommended that the school examines possibilities for the
provision of a modern European language module for those students who are not taking such a language for the Leaving Certificate examination.

Teachers, generally, are aware of the LCVP and they have been supportive of LCVP events. However, there remains considerable scope for implementation of the LCVP as an integrated cross-curricular programme, in conjunction with vocational subject group (VSG) teachers. It is recommended that the LCVP team works towards heightening awareness, at whole-school level, of the nature of the LCVP as an integrated programme through, for example, the use of LCVP-specific notice boards in the staffroom, announcing upcoming LCVP events, and creating opportunities to brief teaching staff regarding the aims and objectives of the LCVP and the centrality of cross-curricular work to the success of students participating in the programme. The LCVP team should explore and document, with all subject departments, the links between their subjects and the link modules curriculum. Planning for the programme can then be extended to include concrete steps to implement the identified cross-curricular links, for example by selecting appropriate enterprise and other activities. Subject teachers can be encouraged to highlight these elements of their subjects for the benefit of the LCVP students in their classes.

1.2 Resources

Most link module lessons are held in the school’s information and communication technology (ICT) room. This has the advantage of facilitating students with access to ICT and the internet. Given the regularity with which LCVP students use the ICT rooms, it is recommended that the core team should give further consideration to the development of the learning environment in these rooms, for example by placing appropriate charts on the walls. This will provide opportunities to reinforce student learning and, potentially, enhance their awareness of key concepts and learning goals relevant to the programme. An appropriately equipped business studies room is used when the ICT room is unavailable.

Senior management provides an adequate annual budget to the LCVP team. This has been used to obtain relevant and useful ICT hardware and software, which have been well used to support the management and co-ordination of the programme.

1.3 Student selection and support

Students and their parents are given timely and accurate information regarding the LCVP. An annual parents’ information evening is held for parents of third-year and Transition Year (TY) students. The school principal and the LCVP co-ordinator address students regarding the LCVP. Once students have made their subject choices, those who meet the requirements of the programme are invited and encouraged to enrol in the LCVP.

A good level of awareness of the LCVP among students, prior to their entry to the programme, was evident during the evaluation and they were very aware of the potential benefits of successful completion of the programme.

1.4 Home-school links

Parent-teacher meetings are used in the usual manner to inform parents of students’ progress and additional contact with students’ homes is as regular and frequent as circumstances demand. Students are provided with regular and useful feedback from their teachers regarding their progress.
The LCVP team in Coláiste Íosagáin has developed valuable links with a variety of business and community enterprises. These enterprises are of great assistance to the school in providing work experience placements for students and in providing expertise and support. These links are also used to source guest speakers and for site visits. The LCVP team is highly commended for its efforts to make and sustain such a variety of quality links with the local community.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND CO-ORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The LCVP team has compiled a thorough and comprehensive LCVP folder which is indicative of a high level of organization and hard work. Effective use has been made of available ICT in carrying out this work. The folder includes a very good plan which lists aims and objectives of the programme, specific to Coláiste Íosagáin, and contains information on the running of the LCVP, effective teaching methodologies and a detailed term-by-term schedule for the timing of the various activities and the delivery of the link modules course content for the two years of the programme. An extensive set of resources has also been prepared and is available to all members of the LCVP team.

Formal meetings of the LCVP team are held twice each year and senior management attends. Informal meetings are held as necessary on an ongoing basis. It is noted from the minutes of meetings that pedagogical issues are discussed in addition to arrangements for managing the various activities that are underway at any particular time. It is evident that reflection and review are part of the ongoing interaction amongst LCVP team members and that the outcomes of such team activities feed back into the planning process. The members of the team are commended for their commitment to the further development of the LCVP. In order to enhance the review process, it is recommended that a more formal approach be adopted, with specific procedures, and that clear and objective success criteria are developed. The views of all relevant parties, including parents and students, should be sought and included in such reviews.

The school’s guidance counsellor provides invaluable support for the implementation of the LCVP in a number of ways. These include discussing subject options with students and advising them appropriately prior to enrolment in the LCVP, interviewing sixth-year students for their optional recorded interview portfolio item and providing assistance to students and the link module teachers in relation to career investigations and work experience placements. It is recommended that, in order to enhance the vocational element of the programme, this process be formalised by the provision of class contact time for the guidance counsellor with link module classes, especially in the first term of fifth year. The inclusion of the guidance counsellor on the LCVP team would also provide significant assistance to the team and enhance the planning process through the application of appropriate specialist knowledge.

2.2 Co-ordination

The LCVP co-ordinator has been co-ordinating the LCVP for nine years and has developed a high level of expertise, as have the other members of the LCVP team. The programme is well co-ordinated and very well structured and organized. There is very good communication between the LCVP team and senior in-school management.

Co-ordinating the LCVP involves carrying out a range of duties and activities including promoting the programme amongst both parents and students, organising relevant LCVP-focused input for
parents’ information evenings, liaising with management, staff, parents and external bodies, keeping records and carrying out a range of other relevant and ad-hoc duties. These duties are carried out effectively and the co-ordinator, with the support of the core team, works hard to ensure the ongoing successful implementation of the programme. Appropriate resources and facilities, including ICT, are available to assist the co-ordinator in carrying out these duties. It is recommended that, in keeping with syllabus recommendations and subject to the availability of resources, the co-ordinator be given a time allowance to fulfil these functions.

2.3 Curriculum

Students new to the LCVP undergo a short induction process at the beginning of the school year following which they participate in a broad and balanced programme of activities and learning experiences. As well as offering students opportunities for teamwork and hands-on experience, these activities are the basis of the various reports and documents for the students’ portfolios. Activities include planning for and managing the visits of at least two guest speakers to the classroom and visiting two local enterprises. Appropriate planning documents or reports are prepared by students in relation to all such activities and they therefore have a choice of documents to include in their portfolios. This is very good practice. Students also carry out an enterprise activity. When examining possible enterprise activities, the LCVP team is encouraged to consider activities which offer opportunities to combine input from the subjects that the LCVP students are studying, with the support of the teachers of these subjects. Theory and practice are well integrated in the manner in which the course content is taught and, in carrying out activities leading to the preparation of the portfolio items, students also cover much of the theoretical content of the course.

All core portfolio items are prepared by students. Of the optional items, an enterprise report, a recorded interview and a work experience diary are prepared and two of these are submitted for assessment. Portfolio items are prepared in school under the supervision of the link modules teachers. It is suggested that consideration be given to completing the My Own Place module, as this will facilitate a more integrated approach to covering many of the specific learning outcomes of the programme and also provide students with an additional optional report for their portfolios.

All students engage in a three-day period of work experience while in fifth year. Students are well prepared in advance and they are facilitated to find their own work placements, subject to the approval of the school, and with assistance from the school if necessary. Students and employers agree the timing of the placement on an individual basis thereby minimising disruption of normal class routines. Due to the resulting ongoing nature of work placements, which take place during the second half of fifth year, it is not possible for school staff to visit the workplaces. However, in order to provide support for both students and employers as necessary and to ensure the successful running of placements, it is recommended that telephone contact is made with each workplace over the course of the placement period. It is further recommended that employers provide a short written report on students’ performance following the placement.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Section 2.1 of this report refers to long-term planning for implementing the LCVP in the school. The class work carried out in the lessons observed reflected the objectives of the programme and was in keeping with planning documents. There was evidence of good short-term planning. Teachers were fully familiar with lesson content and their methodologies provided for
differentiated approaches to teaching and learning in accordance with the range of students’ abilities, needs and interests. Appropriate resource material had been prepared in advance. Teachers’ planning and preparation for lessons resulted in quality learning opportunities for students.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Consistently high quality teaching was evident in all of the lessons observed. Teaching was carried out with enthusiasm and an inclusive, caring and challenging atmosphere was evident in the classrooms. Teachers had high expectations of their students and they supported them very well to meet these expectations. Lessons were well paced and well structured. A disciplined atmosphere that supported an effective learning environment was apparent and good progress was made in all lessons. Students were well behaved, they engaged well with lessons and worked hard to meet the challenges posed by teachers. There was clear evidence of good quality learning and of the development of skills and positive attitudes in all instances.

Teaching methodologies employed were interactive and student-centred, were linked to desired learning outcomes and were appropriate to the ethos of the LCVP. Both individual and group tasks were assigned as appropriate. The methodologies observed included discussion, student writing and note taking, and the effective use of ICT. There was an appropriate emphasis on the use of subject-specific language.

Teachers circulated during lessons and provided support to individuals or small groups of students as necessary, thus providing a differentiated approach to teaching. Continuity from previous lessons was good and new information was well linked to prior learning. Questioning of students was used effectively to assess levels of knowledge and understanding and students generally responded knowledgably and with confidence.

In the opening section of one lesson observed, a visiting speaker made a very good oral presentation to students on the history, context and work of a local voluntary organisation. The presentation was ideally pitched for the level of the students. Its contents were perfectly matched to the requirements of the link modules syllabus. Delivery of the presentation was paced in a manner that gave students time to take in and record the information provided. Following the presentations, students asked a variety of appropriate questions, eliciting further information. The event, which the students themselves were responsible for organising, was very successful and provided students with a variety of valuable learning experiences. The remaining portion of the lesson was effectively used, under the supervision of the teacher, to review the individual and group aims of the activity, to discuss the main points of the presentation and to emphasise the listening and other skills addressed by the activity. Such effective practice is commended.

3.3 Assessment

Lessons were characterised by a high level of interaction between teachers and students facilitating ongoing monitoring and assessing of students’ progress and levels of understanding. Students successfully carried out the various tasks assigned to them during the lessons observed. Good quality learning was evident from their level of engagement with learning activities, the high standard of the work completed, the questions asked and the quality of students’ answers when questioned during class.

Formative assessment of students is carried out on an ongoing basis by questioning them in class, through correction of homework and through teacher movement and observation of students
during class, as noted by the inspector. Students’ written work and their draft portfolio items are 
appropriately monitored and good quality feedback is provided to enable improvement. When a 
draft portfolio item has been prepared, it is reviewed by the teacher and returned to the student for 
follow up. This process is repeated until a final agreed standard is achieved. Thus, portfolio 
preparation is carried out under the direct supervision of teachers.

An appropriate system of formal assessment and reporting on students’ progress is in place. Fifth-
year students are assessed at Christmas and the end of the school year. Sixth-year students are 
assessed at Christmas and they sit a mock examination in the early spring. Progress reports are 
sent to students’ homes following each of these assessments. Additional testing is at the discretion 
of individual teachers.

It is commendable that the LCVP team carries out an annual analysis of state examination results 
in order to ensure that high standards are maintained. It is recommended that specific action plans, 
designed to bring about stated improvements, are drawn up and implemented as a result of such 
analyses and that the already mentioned review process is used to monitor the resulting level of 
improvement.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 
FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

• The LCVP is effectively managed and implemented by a dedicated and hard-working core 
team, the members of which have very good working relationships.
• School management is very aware of the advantages of the programme to students, 
engages well with the core team and provides an adequate annual budget.
• Good, timely, relevant information is provided to students and parents regarding 
programme and subject choices.
• ICT provision is very good and is very accessible to students.
• Appropriate links are maintained with local voluntary and community enterprises and with 
local businesses.
• Extensive and effective planning has been carried out to enhance students’ experiences of 
the programme.
• Lessons were well prepared and well structured. Teachers have high expectations of 
students and there was clear evidence of good quality learning by students.
• Appropriate student-centred, active teaching and learning methodologies are used to teach 
the link modules.
• The LCVP has had a positive impact on students and they demonstrated a high level of 
awareness and appreciation of the benefits of participating in the programme.

As a means of building on these strengths the following key recommendations are made:

• It is recommended that the school re-examines current timetabling arrangements, subject 
to stated priorities, to ensure that student choice is not reduced and to ensure that students’ 
needs are being met.
• It is recommended that the LCVP team works towards heightening awareness, at whole-
school level, of the nature of the LCVP as an integrated programme and that, over time, 
the LCVP team explores and documents, with all subject departments, the links between 
their subjects and the link modules curriculum.
• It is recommended that provision be made for formal class contact by the guidance 
counsellor with link module classes, in particular during the first term of fifth year.
• It is recommended that, in keeping with syllabus recommendations and subject to the availability of resources, time be allocated to the LCVP co-ordinator to fulfil relevant and necessary functions.

• It is recommended that telephone contact is made with each workplace during work-experience placements and that employers provide a short written report on students’ performance following the placement.