

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Skills

**Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Applied
REPORT**

**Fingal Community College
Swords, County Dublin
Roll Number: 70121H**

Date of inspection: 9 December 2010



**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS
AGUS SCILEANNA** | **DEPARTMENT
OF EDUCATION
AND SKILLS**

EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) in Fingal Community College. 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 school principal and the programme co-ordinator at a subsequent post-evaluation meeting.

Fingal Community College is a co-educational school under the auspices of Co. Dublin Vocational Education Committee (VEC). In keeping with its ethos, the school is committed to providing a broad curriculum programme to meet the needs of all of its students. LCA, which is a long established programme in the school, plays a significant role in this regard. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

LCA is an integral part of the senior cycle curriculum and enjoys a high profile in the school. A whole-school approach is taken to publicising and implementing the programme. There is a dedicated LCA news section in the weekly school newsletter and on the website. The programme is discussed at staff meetings and frequent use is made of the dedicated staff room notice board to ensure that everyone is aware of upcoming LCA activities. During the evaluation it was apparent that all staff members are very committed to LCA and display a high level of enthusiasm for the continued development of the programme in the school.

The principal has very good knowledge about the programme and its implementation. Leadership is delegated to a programme co-ordinator with a very good level of ongoing communication between the senior management team and the co-ordinator. At present there is no core LCA team. It is recommended that a core planning team be established. Membership of the core team should be representative of the different components of the programme and include the learning support co-ordinator. The remit of the team should include assisting in the systematic planning, monitoring and evaluation of the programme.

Some good review practices are evident. Each year the co-ordinator carries out a graduate survey and undertakes an analysis of student outcomes in the certificate examinations. Other aspects of the programme are also informally reviewed by the co-ordinator and the senior management team. The information gathered informs ongoing planning for LCA. It is recognised by the co-ordinator and principal that there is scope to extend this review process to include other members of the school community. It is recommended therefore that a formal review of the programme be

undertaken each year in consultation with all staff, parents and the current LCA students. The outcomes of each review should be documented and used to inform ongoing planning for the programme. The outcomes and subsequent actions arising from each review should be forwarded to the board of management.

1.2 Resources

Some very good practice is evident in the deployment of staff to LCA. Teachers are assigned to subjects in line with their experience in teaching LCA and interest in the programme. In the last academic year a staff audit was carried out to seek expressions of interest in teaching LCA. This very good practice has built capacity in the team. Teachers new to the programme are facilitated to attend relevant continuing professional development (CPD). Records maintained in the LCA planning folder indicate that there is a very good level of engagement with relevant in-service. The programme co-ordinator provides a good level of ongoing support to the teaching team. To optimise students' learning, the practice of assigning two different teachers to share the teaching of a subject, as is the practice in Social Education and Gaelige Chumarsáideach should be reviewed.

The LCA timetable does not fulfill the requirements of Department Circular Letter M29/95. A shortfall of two hours tuition time is apparent from an analysis of the timetable. This practice results in a deficit in the class time allocated to various components within the programme. To ensure compliance with Department regulations it is recommended that the LCA timetable be re-configured to ensure that students are provided with a minimum of twenty-eight hours of tuition per week. In the case of some subjects, there is scope to adjust the spread of lessons across the teaching week. This should be addressed in the context of future timetabling to facilitate optimal continuity and progression in teaching and learning.

A very good range of resources is available to support programme implementation and co-ordination. The programme co-ordinator has a fully equipped office. Students have appropriate access to well-equipped specialist rooms and to a range of information and communications technology (ICT). A dedicated LCA budget funds the provision of additional resources to support the programme. These are very good practices.

1.3 Student selection and support

There is a whole-school approach to the identification of potential students for LCA and a systematic selection process is in place. There is a good level of collaboration between relevant staff members to support this process. It is good practice that, as part of the selection procedures, students complete an application form outlining their reasons for applying for admission to the programme. As the whole-school admissions policy is currently being reviewed, it would prove beneficial to include, as part of this policy, the general criteria used by the school for admission into LCA.

The co-ordinator facilitates a good induction programme to assist students to settle into LCA. To enhance practice consideration could be given to delivering elements of this programme over a number of days and inviting parents to attend at part of a session. The induction resources that are available on the LCA website (www.slss.ie) may prove useful.

The guidance department plays an active role in providing personal support for LCA students on a one-to-one basis. In line with good practice the guidance counselor is formally timetabled for one period of Vocational Preparation and Guidance per week. A well-developed guidance plan supports the provision of Guidance in LCA.

Aspects of the LCA learning support programme need to be reviewed. A number of LCA students have special educational needs (SEN). A learning profile for each student with SEN is prepared by a member of staff who holds a SEN qualification. This is good practice. LCA classes are also timetabled for learning support classes in Mathematics and English. However, at the time of the evaluation there was a lack of clarity around how the specific identified needs of students with SEN are planned for by the team of teachers involved in learning support and how a whole-school approach to inclusion is facilitated. Some of the information noted in the learning support planning documentation provided was inaccurate and out of date.

The whole-school learning support policy is currently being updated. As part of this process it is recommended that the LCA learning support programme be reviewed. This review should be led by a staff member who holds a recognised SEN qualification and carried out in collaboration with the principal, LCA co-ordinator and other relevant staff. The revised and updated procedures for the identification, delivery and ongoing monitoring of LCA students who have SEN should be documented in the LCA planning folder. Other procedures such as how the SEN team works with and supports mainstream teachers and how the discontinuation of learning support is determined should also be included. If the learning support co-ordinator was part of a core team as recommended earlier in the report it would facilitate a more cohesive and whole-school approach to planning for LCA students who have SEN.

1.4 Home-school and community links

Parents and students are provided with a high level of support, advice and guidance in making programme choices. It is particularly commendable that parents of prospective students are met with individually by the programme co-ordinator as part of the enrolment process.

Very good efforts are made to positively promote the LCA programme in the local community and to celebrate student achievements through events such as the open evening and graduation night. Good links are made with the local community through students' participation in work experience, the operation of mini-companies and in the completion of students' practical achievement tasks.

Attendance is closely monitored with a range of early warning systems and follow-up measures in place. Students and parents receive good levels of feedback on attendance and progress through the issuing of school reports and by means of the annual parent-teacher meeting.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

Programme planning is the responsibility of the entire LCA cohort of twenty-three teachers led by the programme co-ordinator. Very good collaboration is apparent between teachers who are taking responsibility for students' tasks and other LCA teachers. Management facilitates meetings of the entire team usually three times during the year. Many additional informal meetings of smaller groups of staff take place throughout the academic year. Minutes of each meeting of the full team are recorded to facilitate continuity between meetings. This is good practice. A smaller core planning team, as recommended earlier in this report would alleviate some of the challenges involved in organising and ensuring full attendance at regular meetings of such a large group of people.

A detailed and well-organised LCA plan outlines how the programme is organised for each student cohort. Relevant programme plans for each subject are included. As a next step in the planning process, it is recommended that an assessment policy for LCA be devised by the core team. The drafting of this policy will provide an opportunity to critically appraise the formative and summative assessment strategies currently in use. Particular attention should focus on how the principles of assessment for learning (AfL) could be further incorporated into all subject areas.

A whole-school policy on literacy and numeracy should be developed over time. As part of this process the LCA core team should consider how students' progress in literacy and numeracy is facilitated and monitored in the delivery of LCA.

2.2 Co-ordination

Leadership of the programme has been delegated to a programme co-ordinator, appointed under Circular Letter PPT 19/02. The co-ordinator is very committed to the task and has a comprehensive knowledge of the programme and its implementation. A culture of self-evaluation is evident in the work of the co-ordinator. Very good progress has been made in some of the areas initially identified for further development. The co-ordinator has timetabled contact with all LCA class groups. This good practice enables the co-ordinator to maintain regular contact with all students of the programme.

The co-ordinator demonstrates a high level of commitment to CPD. It is obvious that the experience gained has impacted very positively on the quality of programme implementation in the school. The co-ordinator is an active member of the Co. Dublin VEC Co-ordinators' Network. This forum provides an opportunity to share expertise and devise strategies on areas of common concern.

2.3 Curriculum

The subjects offered as part of LCA provide diversity and facilitate students in continuing in education or finding employment. Some good practice was noted in taking students' needs and interests into account in planning for the vocational specialisms and electives offered as part of the programme. The school has the capacity to offer a wide range of LCA subjects. Some further consideration could be given to gender balance in the provision of electives and vocational specialisms offered. In this context the feasibility of offering a wider range of subjects as elective or visual art components should be considered. For instance, the school could provide prospective LCA students with a list of possible subjects that could be offered as vocational specialisms, electives or arts-education modules within the resources currently available in the school. This initial survey could then inform the actual range of subjects planned for the two-year programme of each LCA cohort.

At the time of the evaluation there was a disproportionate relationship between the amount of teaching time allocated to the some components when balanced against the number of credits being awarded. In the context of students having twenty-eight hours of tuition time, it is recommended that the class time allocated to all components of the programme be reviewed.

Systematic procedures are in place for the co-ordination of work experience. The school operates the good practice of encouraging students to change work placements for each work experience module. This ensures that students gain experience in a range of work placements and assists them ultimately in their choice of future career. Very good practice exists with regard to the routines for

on-site monitoring and appraisal of students on completion of each module. The commitment of all staff involved in supporting this work is acknowledged and commended.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Planning for the delivery of each subject has traditionally been the remit of the individual subject teacher or subject department. It is evident from documentation reviewed during the evaluation that the programme plans for each subject are at varying stages of development. Some very high quality planning was noted. Best practice was evident where the subject plan clearly demonstrated how the subject was delivered in the school context by noting a sequence of lessons that demonstrated the intended learning outcomes, teaching strategies, and assessment opportunities. Programme planning supports high quality learning and teaching. Therefore, all teachers should follow all aspects of the plans and note the teaching strategies and assessment opportunities that proved most effective. This information can be shared at team meetings as a means of sharing good practice and building capacity.

To facilitate consistency in planning practice it is recommended that the co-ordinator, in association with the core team, devise a planning template that could be used by all subject areas. The very good practice noted in some planning documentation should inform the development of the template. The template should enable students' expected knowledge and understanding to be outlined in terms of learning outcomes for the two years of the programme. Specific methodologies, suitable timeframes, appropriate resources and assessment strategies should also be documented. Responsibility for the further development and ongoing review of subject plans should be the collective remit of each subject department team. This practice is already evident among some subject teams.

The overall quality of short-term planning for the lessons observed was very good. Best practice was evident in lessons where the range of planned activities supported the active engagement of students in the learning process.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Good quality learning and teaching was evident during the evaluation. All of the lessons observed had a clear focus and were, in almost all instances, paced appropriately to support the abilities of all students. In most instances the intended learning outcomes for the lesson were shared with students from the outset. This practice proved effective in scaffolding lesson structure and assisting students to focus on the lesson. It is recommended that time be taken towards the end of all lessons to revisit and assess students' progress in each of the intended learning objectives.

A very good range of teaching methodologies appropriate to LCA was evident across the variety of lessons observed. Additional resources were well used to support learning. Some excellent strategies in supporting students' literacy were noted. In Hotel, Catering and Tourism the key words associated with the topic were highlighted on the board and reference was made to these key terms as students progressed through the lesson. The flash cards designed by the subject department include a range of well chosen visual images to enable students to use the correct terminology when evaluating dishes.

In many of the lessons observed deliberate efforts were made to support students' personal and social development. Some very good examples of well-managed group work were observed. A particularly good example occurred in a lesson where students, in preparation for a key assignment, had to plan a sports drill and teach it to first-year students. In planning this task, the students displayed a remarkable ability to apply previous knowledge and demonstrated very good oral communication skills. A high level of in-class monitoring and subsequent plenary sessions enabled the teacher to support each group in planning the training drill. It was noted that students had to complete an evaluation of the activity. This very good practice facilitates students to critically reflect on their efforts.

In all of the lessons observed learning and teaching took place in a secure and supportive environment. A very good rapport was apparent between teachers and students and a climate of respect was evident in almost all lessons. Best practice was evident where established classroom routines were consistently implemented throughout the lesson.

Observation of class activities and interaction with students indicated that they are making good progress in LCA. In a number of lessons students displayed a very good level of ability to work on their own, in pairs or in small groups. In the practical lessons observed a high level of practical, procedural and ICT skills were evident.

There was some variation in the quality and organisation of student notebooks reviewed during the evaluation. Some very good practice was noted. It is recommended that the core team in collaboration with each subject department review the system in use for LCA students' notebooks. Students should be encouraged in all subjects to keep a notebook or folder that includes key points of information covered in theoretical and practical lessons, and that facilitates the systematic storage of any handouts and worksheets distributed in class. This notebook would prove an excellent revision tool for students.

3.3 Assessment

Teachers routinely provided a high level of ongoing in-class support to enhance student achievement. Assessment of students' learning was an integral component of all of the lessons observed. Students' previous learning was regularly assessed. One particularly good example occurred in an ICT lesson that began by students completing an electronic worksheet that assessed students' understanding of the technical language covered in the previous lesson. This exercise provided the teacher with an opportunity to assess individual levels of learning and provide additional clarification where required. There were many examples evident where high quality questioning strategies or well-processed plenary sessions from group work provided opportunities for teacher feedback on classroom learning.

A review of a random sample of students' coursework folders indicated some good practice in assigning homework to reinforce, apply or extend classroom learning. In some instances particularly good practice was evident in monitoring of students' work where useful teacher comments provided valuable feedback on written work. This good practice enhances learning by informing students about their own individual strengths, highlights areas for improvement and assists students to reach their full potential. There is scope to extend this good practice across all subject areas. It is recommended that the range of homework assigned to LCA students be reviewed in order to enhance current practice and to provide additional formative assessment opportunities. The range of activities assigned should complement all assessment objectives of the programme. Students should be provided with an opportunity to make a note of all homework assigned in their school journal.

Key assignments are completed in each subject area. However, the quality of the organisation, maintenance, and layout of completed key assignments varied across different subject areas. It is recommended that the core team discusses and agrees best practice in relation to the organisation and presentation of completed key assignments.

High levels of teacher support are provided for the completion of tasks and some very good quality learning was noted. However, there is scope to improve the learning potential of key assignments in some subject areas by challenging students to enhance their knowledge and skills. Some good practice in the monitoring of completed key assignment work was noted. However, the overall quality of monitoring completed key assignment work should be reviewed. Planning for each LCA module should not solely focus on the completion of a key assignment, but also on the potential learning and assessment opportunities that arise from completing each key assignment. Learning experiences can be differentiated to challenge the complete range of student abilities and students should receive quality feedback on completed work.

Currently, LCA students only sit one set of formal in-house examinations, namely the mock certificate examinations in year two of the programme. To provide additional summative assessment opportunities and to support the development of examination techniques, it is recommended that formal in-house examinations be organised for year one LCA students in line with the school's policy for other senior cycle programmes. The modes of assessment employed should be informed by the range of assessments used in the LCA examination for each subject area.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- LCA is an integral part of the senior cycle curriculum and enjoys a high profile in the school.
- All staff members are very committed to LCA and display a high level of enthusiasm for the continued development of the programme in the school.
- A very good range of resources is available to support programme implementation and co-ordination.
- A detailed and well-organised LCA plan outlines how the programme is organised for each student cohort.
- There is a very committed co-ordinator appointed who has a comprehensive knowledge of the programme. A culture of self-evaluation is evident.
- Some good practice was noted in taking students' needs and interests into account in planning the programme.
- Systematic procedures are in place for the co-ordination, organisation and monitoring of work experience.
- The overall quality of short-term planning for the lessons observed was very good.
- A very good range of teaching methodologies appropriate to LCA was evident across the variety of lessons observed. Some excellent strategies in supporting students' literacy were noted.
- There were many examples of high quality questioning strategies being used in lessons. Well-processed plenary sessions from group work provided opportunities for teacher feedback on classroom learning.

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

- In accordance with Circular Letter M 29/95, the LCA master timetable should be re-configured to ensure that students are provided with a minimum of twenty-eight hours of tuition per week. In this context the class time allocated to all components of the programme should be reviewed.
- A core LCA planning team should be established.
- The LCA learning support programme should be reviewed. This review should be led by a staff member who holds a recognised SEN qualification and carried out in collaboration with the principal, LCA co-ordinator and other relevant staff.
- An assessment policy for LCA should be devised by the core team. This process will provide an opportunity to critically appraise and enhance the formative and summative assessment strategies currently in use.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board welcomes the many strengths identified during the LCA Inspection; in particular the integration of LCA into the overall senior cycle curriculum; the strategies employed for supporting students' literacy; the LCA plan and the commitment of the LCA co-ordinator.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

The LCA timetable will be amended for 2011-2012 to include 28 hours of class contact time as per all other students in the college.

The LCA Learning Support programme has been reviewed and a new co-ordinator for SEN has been appointed – this Post Holder has a full SEN qualification.

The LCA team will review the LCA Assessment Policy.