An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
REPORT

Loreto Secondary School
Vevay Road, Bray
County Wicklow

Roll Number: 61820J

Date of inspection: 2 October 2009
EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE VOCATIONAL PROGRAMME (LCVP)

This report has been written following an evaluation of the LCVP in Loreto Secondary School, Bray. 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 following the evaluation.

Loreto Secondary School, Bray, offers a range of subjects and programmes to its cohort of students: the Junior Certificate, the Transition Year (TY), the Leaving Certificate established and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The school currently has an enrolment of 853 girls. The school has been involved in the LCVP since its inception in 1994 and the position of the programme is well established in the school’s curriculum. 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 principal recognises the LCVP as a programme which combines the academic strengths of the Leaving Certificate with a dynamic focus on self-directed learning, enterprise and work. The inclusion of the LCVP on the curriculum of Loreto Secondary School, Bray, provides the school with an opportunity to develop students’ learning and skills and support students with particular interest in business and enterprise. The process of student selection developed by the school aims to ensure that the LCVP students are a hardworking interested group committed to the programme. There was considerable evidence to support the attainment of this objective in the course of the evaluation. The arrangements for student selection and application for LCVP are discussed annually at staff meetings so there is an awareness of the programme among the teaching staff in general.

The innovation of LCVP Student of the Year awards in both fifth and sixth year and the awarding of the certificates of programme completion to all participating LCVP students give students a sense of identity and achievement. The acknowledgement of personal and group achievements of students in this way is in line with the overall philosophy and direction of LCVP and is highly commended. The celebration of achievement at the graduation ceremony also gives staff and parents an insight into the success of the programme for students. The awareness and appreciation demonstrated by management, staff and students of the value of the LCVP is testament to the quality of the programme in the school.

1.2 Resources

Senior management ensures the successful implementation of the programme through the team of teachers deployed to effectively put in place all aspects of the programme. The additional LCVP
teaching allocation is deployed for the teaching of the Link Modules and for a weekly meeting of the LCVP core team. The allocation is also used to provide pastoral care form-time for both LCVP groups. This is a unique feature of the delivery of the programme in Loreto Secondary School, Bray, and means that each year LCVP students form a distinctive class group. The co-ordinator assigned to each LCVP class group acts as form teacher and has responsibility for monitoring attendance, completion of portfolio and other work as well as academic progress. The combining of the form teacher and co-ordinator roles contributes to the effectiveness of the programme. The daily contact ensures timely completion of work and the relationship developed with the co-ordinator creates an environment in which the LCVP students can develop as independent learners. This also ensures that the delivery of the programme is holistic. The class co-ordinators of LCVP are responsible for the teaching and facilitation of all components of the programme, including the delivery of the Links Modules, the organisation of visiting speakers and of the students’ main enterprise activity, as well as organising the annual bonding outing, work experience placements and end of year LCVP graduation night.

The time allocation to the programme is optimal with three periods in fifth year, one double and one single, and a double period in sixth year plus one period dedicated to Career Guidance. The single greatest challenge for school management is finding an appropriate position for the Link Modules on the timetable. Currently, the double period allocated to the Link Modules begins at 8 am and continues through to one period assigned to Faith Formation, scheduled at 8.45am. All students pursue a modern language to Leaving Certificate level so the language requirement is met in this way.

Information and communication technology (ICT) facilities are available within the school to facilitate students in the preparation of documents and portfolio items and teachers in the preparation of presentations and materials for use in the classroom. School management has also recently purchased memory pens dedicated for student use in the LCVP. This is a praiseworthy innovation. Loreto Secondary School, Bray, has a demonstration room and computer room where each of the students has access to a computer. Parents’ association fundraising has recently enabled the school to purchase three interactive whiteboards, data projectors and laptops. Such ICT equipment and audio-visual equipment, TV and DVD, are available for use in the LCVP teacher-based classrooms and for use with visiting speakers. ICT courses have been provided within the school to facilitate teachers’ upskilling in the use of the interactive whiteboards. The further integration of ICT is a longer-term objective for both the school and the LCVP team.

Senior management has facilitated attendance at available in-service and the LCVP class co-ordinators have attended in-service courses to familiarise themselves with the implementation of the programme. The continuing professional development (CPD) availed of has equipped teachers with additional skills and new and creative methodologies and has provided invaluable opportunities for teachers to network with other schools and co-ordinators. The benefit derived from attendance at in-service was clearly in evidence both in terms of the quality of programme planning and the quality of delivery of course content. Materials and resources developed for use in the Link Modules were being utilised.

1.3 Student selection and support

Information on the programme is provided to students at key times in their schooling. The parents of students entering fifth year are invited to an information evening where the programme co-ordinator, the LCVP co-ordinator and the guidance counselor explain possible choices for students the following September. On the same day, students are given information so that parents and
students can discuss the options in an informed manner. The possibility of past students speaking at information evenings for prospective LCVP students from third year and TY should also be explored for the future.

Students are advised on the criteria for participation in the programme and of the commitment needed to successfully participate. The use of an application form and criteria brings an element of self-evaluation from the outset. Part of the application process includes a self-assessment form where each student must reflect on her own qualities, interests and skills. This ensures that students have a very sound knowledge about the LCVP and a keen sense of the objectives of the programme.

The induction of students into the programme is thorough and unique. The bonding trip organised at the beginning of the school year, involving both LCVP students from year one and from year two, is an exemplar of best practice. Students new to the programme are initiated into teamwork with the existing year two LCVP students through team-building exercises and activities in a relaxed and purposeful learning environment. It ensures that students have a very sound knowledge of the objectives of the programme and that learning within the programme can start immediately. The LCVP programme as delivered is also designed to develop student independent learning which is one of the key principles which underpin the programme. For example, the fifth year LCVP group must take responsibility for the organisation of the sixth year LCVP graduation ceremony.

School management maintains the provision of one class group only and the current fifth year uptake of twenty-four students is the ideal number which the computer room can accommodate. The learning support needs of each LCVP student are addressed through the general learning support programme within the school. The learning support co-ordinator is available should additional information or support in managing and meeting an individual student’s needs be required.

1.4 Home-school links

The curriculum is balanced and shows that there are good well-established links with the local community through such items as work placements and visiting speakers. The LCVP co-ordination draws on contacts among the parent body to expand the range of work experience or placement possibilities. The school also draws on the pool of expertise available to them through the parent body for the organisation of speakers from enterprise or charitable organisations which provide opportunities for visits in or out of the school.

LCVP students undertake work experience placements and fundraising and community service for local charities. School-community links nurtured through LCVP activities enhance the image and profile of the school in the locality because student activities are successful and students are seen taking responsibility, organising and contributing.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND CO-ORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The planning for LCVP is exemplary. There is an appropriate current written LCVP plan in place. The plan is comprehensive and the overarching aims and objectives for the programme and for student are clearly documented. The programme is presented as an enhanced Leaving Certificate
in line with the principles and philosophy of the programme. The benefits of the programme are clearly outlined, including such items as personal development, emphasis on self-directed learning, skills development and attainment. Those highlighted include ICT, teamwork, social, reporting, presentation and problem-solving skills. The plan also details the student selection policy and criteria for student selection. The LCVP planning folder contains detailed schemes of work for each year group, which outline the themes and topics to be covered for each week of each half term. The planning folder also contains a calendar of events for the school year, with some excellent examples of forward planning. The planning folder also includes relevant Department circulars.

It is clear that evaluation and review of the programme form an integral component of the planning process. The LCVP team takes a collaborative co-operative approach. There is ongoing review and monitoring of the programme at the weekly LCVP team meeting. Student performance is carefully monitored at every stage in each student’s learning. The LCVP team uses self-evaluation at different stages of the programme. Students complete a student evaluation form for individual activities and at the end of fifth year. As part of the evaluation of the programme, students are asked to evaluate their own performance and participation as well as aspects of the programme itself. This is very good practice. Parents are also requested to complete an evaluation form. Parent evaluation forms and student evaluation forms are also kept from year to year. They provide invaluable insights into the successful aspects of the programme and those that require further attention.

A full year review takes place during the end-of-year meetings. The principal, LCVP co-ordinators and programme co-ordinator meet as needed throughout the school year and always hold an end of year review. Analysis of examination results also forms part of review at the initial team meeting at the beginning of the year. There is evidence that programme evaluation and review has had a positive effect on the planning and delivery of the programme. The tracking of past-students was being planned at the time of the evaluation. It was intended to survey past students to ascertain the positive impact of LCVP skills development in later work and study. This is an example of excellent practice.

2.2 Co-ordination

A weekly meeting time is scheduled for the LCVP team and the school’s programme co-ordinator which has proven very useful for planning and co-ordinating programme activities. The time assigned to LCVP co-ordinators gives them time to reflect, to plan and to review. The quality of the collaboration between the LCVP class co-ordinators and the school’s programme co-ordinator in planning, implementing and reviewing the programme was clearly in evidence in the scheduled meeting observed at the time of the evaluation. The close working relationships between the members of the LCVP team ensure the minimum of duplication of effort and therefore maximises the use of time. A very structured action plan accompanies every meeting of the LCVP team and items for further research and action are clearly identified and assigned. The benefit of such co-ordination to students was unquestionable.

All documentation designed for use in the programme is carefully thought out and clearly presented. The programme co-ordinator has overarching responsibility for programmes in the school and has developed templates, questionnaires, evaluation sheets and organisational materials. The programme co-ordinator also acts as chairperson of the weekly team meetings and assists the LCVP class co-ordinators to organise bonding trips, work experience placements and LCVP graduation. The programme co-ordinator’s office is useful for centrally locating files and
resources, such as past examination results, work experience employer reports, lists of facilitating employers, schemes of work and the LCVP folder.

2.3 Curriculum

The current teachers and co-ordinators have different specialist backgrounds, and the personal strengths and skills of the LCVP team determine and shape the LCVP curriculum. This enhances the richness of the programme. Access to the expertise of Business is an integral part of programme delivery and contributes to its effectiveness, as there is a natural link with the course content of the Link Modules. Indeed, many LCVP students study Business as one of the subjects within their chosen vocational subject grouping (VSG). The contributions of individual teachers within the school support the programme and there were many examples of this. The guidance counsellor assists students with work experience and possible future careers. The music teachers help with the auditions for the School Talent Show and members of staff from different disciplines give talks to students on occasion in relation to, for example, health and safety or event management. The computer studies teacher also helps in relation to ICT skills, when required.

The School Talent Show has been selected as the school’s LCVP enterprise activity, as it offers the opportunity to involve a large number of students. There is a long-established tradition of drama and music production in Loreto Secondary School, Bray, and as an enterprise activity, it links well with this tradition and builds on it. Each student must accept responsibility for an area of the activity, and is made aware that failure to deliver on a particular aspect would diminish the overall quality of the activity. Therefore, students learn to be responsible members of a team. The organisation of the talent show is an effective forum for enhancing and promoting the school spirit. The talent show offers the opportunity to raise money to support the LCVP sponsored charity. On completion of the enterprise activity, the students compile their enterprise report.

Insights into the world of work provided through the work experience element of the programme are invaluable to students. There is good preparation for and monitoring of students’ work experience placements. As part of preparation for work experience, students have an appointment with the guidance counsellor to discuss possible future careers. All syllabus topics relating to work experience, the career investigation and the preparation of the CV are completed prior to the work placement. Students are also prepared in terms of time keeping and taking breaks, dress code, courtesy and politeness, as well as areas such as displaying initiative and co-operating with colleagues. Prior to the student going on the placement, relevant documentation is sent to the employer, including insurance details and the student evaluation form. In general, students carefully select their place of work and find the overall experience positive and enjoyable. Students may also choose the timing of their work experience, as work placements take place during school breaks.

The guidance counsellor also arranges a ‘mock interview’ evening when students have the opportunity to prepare for and take part in an interview relevant to their chosen career path. Parental contacts are drawn upon for this. The recorded interview is one of the optional portfolio items available to students. It is recommended that the LCVP team examine the feasibility of introducing the recorded interview as a possible portfolio item for students in the future.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN THE LINK MODULES

3.1 Planning and preparation
The delivery of the curriculum as observed was characterised by clarity of direction and purposeful learning. Detailed planning ensured that much material was covered within the time available and included effective planning for resources. Worksheets had been prepared and were distributed to students which facilitated them in recapitulating on learning within the particular lesson. Clear learning objectives for individual lessons and for a series of lessons were shared with students. There was a sense of involving students in setting objectives and planning of work. This is highly commended. There was a good structure to lessons and the lesson structure reflected the quality of the planning and schemes of work completed.

### 3.2 Learning and teaching

The opening and the closing of the lessons referred to previous learning, introduced the learning objectives for that particular lesson and provided clarity regarding where the lesson stood in a series of lessons on a particular topic. The teacher was systematic in her approach and the pace was appropriate to students’ abilities and their capacity for challenge. The objectives set for the lessons observed were clearly attained as the lessons progressed. In line with the approach adopted, it is recommended that teachers gradually introduce the use of the specific learning outcomes (SLOs) and require the students themselves to check attainment of these outcomes.

A range of methodologies appropriate to the programme was employed throughout lessons. These ranged from teacher presentation, group work, plenary feedback from students, questioning and discussion. The teaching was effective and in the lessons observed, both the initial teacher presentation and the tasks assigned to students were clear and worked well. Even in the context of teacher presentation, students were involved through interaction and questioning at different stages. It is recommended that over time the integration of ICT into teaching and learning be consolidated. In relation to lesson content, the lesson topic was appropriate to the time of the school year and concepts were well explained. There was also an appropriate emphasis on terminology and definitions of business and enterprise terms. Initially, the teacher brought the students’ focus to the language used to ensure understanding and then progressed to the underlying concepts and meaning. This was an effective approach. The teacher probed student learning and knowledge through effective questioning. In this way, students were well prepared to address the case study in question, presented in one lesson observed.

The group work which followed was well structured and therefore productive. The teacher circulated and was affirmative of students’ efforts. Through completing tasks, students demonstrated appropriate skills and competencies. The high quality of student understanding was reflected in students’ questioning, and in their responses to questions. The teacher was skillful in refining and improving student responses. Students demonstrated positive attitudes to learning. The calm and pleasant teaching manner ensured a relaxed and consistent work ethic. Students were attentive and engaged throughout lessons observed. The high expectations of students demonstrated by teachers were rewarded with consistent application and interest.

### 3.3 Assessment

Students’ work is regularly assessed and they receive appropriate levels of constructive feedback. There is systematic recording of students’ attendance and progress and due attention is paid to student adherence to deadlines. This was evident in lessons observed and through observation of the weekly meeting. The attention to detail in relation to student preparation of portfolio items was excellent. Teachers reminded students of the marking scheme for the particular item, what to look out for and the deadline for completion. Students were also reminded of important aspects of portfolio work. Such aspects included the use of their own words, providing as much detail as
possible and ensuring the inclusion of their own personal contribution. Students were also reminded to link their experience to their own vocational subject groupings (VSGs).

Formal school examinations for fifth years take place twice a year, in February and at the end of the school year. For sixth years, students have a pre-leaving certificate examination in February prior to sitting the final Leaving Certificate examination in May. A system of continuous assessment is used for all students and for all subjects when preparing Christmas reports. An analysis of examination results also forms part of review of the programme at the beginning of each year. Attainment in certificate examinations in the LCVP is consistently high with good levels of both merits and distinctions. A recent focus of the LCVP team is the increase in the percentage of distinctions which students attain from year to year. This is commendable.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The process of student selection developed by the school aims to ensure that the LCVP students are a hardworking interested group committed to the programme.
- The fact that LCVP students form a distinctive class group is a unique feature of the delivery of the programme and the combining of the form teacher and co-ordinator roles contributes to the effectiveness of the programme.
- Senior management ensures the successful implementation of the programme through the team of teachers deployed to effectively put in place all aspects of the programme.
- The information and communication technology (ICT) facilities available ensure that each student has access to a computer and facilitate teachers in the preparation of presentations and materials.
- The induction of students into the programme is thorough and unique. It ensures that students have a very sound knowledge of the objectives of the programme.
- The curriculum is balanced and shows that there are good well-established links with the local community through work placements and visiting speakers.
- The planning for LCVP is exemplary. It is clear that evaluation and review of the programme form an integral component of the planning process.
- The collaboration between the LCVP class co-ordinators and the school’s programme co-ordinator in planning, implementing and reviewing the programme is very good.
- The teaching is effective and in the lessons observed, both the initial teacher presentation and the tasks assigned to students were clear and worked well.
- The high quality of student understanding was reflected in students’ questioning and in their responses to questions.
- Attainment in certificate examinations in the LCVP is consistently high with good levels of both merits and distinctions.

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

- It is recommended that the further integration of ICT into teaching and learning, a longer-term objective articulated by school management and the LCVP team, be pursued.
- It is recommended that the LCVP team examine the feasibility of introducing the recorded interview as a possible portfolio item for students in the future.

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