

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Applied
REPORT**

**St Joseph's Secondary School
Spanish Point, County Clare
Roll Number: 62010C**

Date of inspection: 9 December 2010



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

EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the LCA programme in St Joseph's Secondary School. 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-ordinators 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, the programme co-ordinators and the core team following the evaluation. The board of management of the school 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.

St Joseph's Secondary School is a voluntary secondary school under the trusteeship of CEIST *Catholic Education an Irish Schools Trust*. Originally founded by the Sisters of Mercy as a day and boarding school for girls, the school has adapted to meet societal changes and is now a coeducational day school serving Spanish Point and the surrounding areas. The school has provided LCA from the inception of the programme nationally in 1995.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

LCA is viewed by the school as an important element of its programme provision. The principal recognises the importance of the programme's role in achieving a suitably differentiated and inclusive provision for students of the school, their interests and abilities. The principal provides appropriate leadership for the implementation of LCA and also delegates leadership to the co-ordinators and the programme team to an appropriate extent.

The implementation of the programme forms part of the day-to-day life of St Joseph's and involves all members of the school community. LCA is given due prominence, being appropriately publicised on the school's website and in its other documentation. Further coverage is given to the programme, its aims and its organisation at the third-year open night and at the first-year information night. The LCA co-ordinators address classes to provide students with appropriately timed information to support them when selecting their choice of programme. Opportunities are sought and availed of to provide a positive profile of the programme in the school, an example of which is the display of LCA students' work at parent-teacher meetings and at information nights.

Almost all of the teachers in the school have experience of teaching LCA and thus the need for induction for teachers new to the programme has not been to the fore. It is urged, however, that

structured induction materials be assembled for use whenever a teacher, permanent or temporary, is being introduced to the teaching of LCA for the first time. These induction materials should be included in the LCA plan and may have a wider role as reference materials for all teachers.

1.2 Resources

It is the policy of the school, in line with good planning practice, that all teachers are assigned to teach the programme over time and this policy has been implemented to a large extent. Teachers are appropriately assigned in line with their qualifications and interests.

The various elements of the programme and the courses taught are generally timetabled in line with LCA requirements and the guidance provided by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). The following recommendations are made, however, for further improvement. The allocation of time for the *Information and Communication Technology* (ICT) specialism should be increased and this specialism should be taught in each of the four sessions. The timetabling of the *Introduction to ICT* course should be reviewed and specific detail of the teaching of this course, in parallel with the ICT specialism, should be clearly delineated in the LCA plan. The practice at present of teaching the *Introduction to ICT* course as a stand-alone course in session one and session two and not starting the ICT specialism until session three may not provide suitably challenging work for students in sessions one and two. The total number of periods allocated to these two courses at present is at the minimum advised and this should be reviewed.

The time allocated to Arts Education is less than advised by the support service. It is recommended that this be reviewed and that Arts Education be taught in each of the four sessions. It is urged that task tutorial time (including personal reflection and practical achievement) be increased in line with the guidance of the support service.

While ICT is effectively used for the necessary on-line work of the co-ordinators, there is no ready access in the LCA office to do this work. It is recommended that basic computer and internet access facilities be provided in the LCA office for this purpose and to facilitate work on the further development of the LCA plan and other programme documentation, including teaching resources.

The use of ICT in teaching, as observed in the course of the evaluation, is limited. However, the provision of ICT teaching facilities in each classroom was imminent at the time of the evaluation and this is acknowledged. It is urged that steps be taken to integrate the use of digital resources into the teaching of all LCA courses as a matter of urgency.

Teachers are encouraged and facilitated within the school to attend relevant continuing professional development (CPD) sessions. Most teachers in the school have experience of teaching LCA and thus the level of knowledge of the programme among the staff is relatively high. However, whole-staff CPD, and in particular input covering teaching strategies, approaches and methodologies suitable for LCA, could be of benefit to all staff and should be considered. This could be arranged within the school, with teachers volunteering to work with their colleagues, providing an opportunity to apply the collaborative approach as reflected in LCA guidelines.

1.3 Student selection and support

The co-ordinators, the special educational needs co-ordinator and guidance counsellor take the lead in identifying students for whom LCA is the most suitable programme and in making these students aware of the programme. The decision regarding enrolment in the programme is left to

the student and parents in line with good collaborative practice. Occasionally, students choose not to follow the advice offered but in all cases flexibility is exercised so that students can change their initial choice within a reasonable time. This also represents good practice in recognising the rights of students and parents. The guidance provided in the context of programme choice is appropriate to the needs of the students.

It is acknowledged that students have a relatively high level of general awareness and knowledge of the programme, given its profile in the school, and the focused and detailed induction provided on entry to LCA. It is recommended, however, that the structured induction course for students, consistent with the guidance of PDST, be detailed and included in the LCA plan.

The additional educational needs of students are well supported within the programme. This support is an integral part of the supports in place in the wider school. Individual education plans (IEPs) are provided for students where it is formally indicated that this is in the student's interests. These IEPs are drawn up collaboratively, under the leadership and guidance of the special educational needs co-ordinator, in a process that includes inputs from teachers and the individual students. This collaboration is in line with good practice. Liaison between the LCA team and the special educational needs team is very effective and the teams arrange regular meetings to set targets and review progress.

Support for the further development of students' literacy and numeracy skills is a major consideration in the allocation of resource and learning support time. That this support is integrated with work on the completion of student tasks and key assignments is consistent with the integrated approach of LCA and is in line with good planning practice. As a further improvement in support for literacy and numeracy skills development, it is recommended that the special educational needs department and the LCA teaching team collaborate in planning for skills development in all lessons. Planning should include the identification and development of consistent approaches for use in each lesson to facilitate and reinforce students' learning.

1.4 Home-school links

Policy and practice in the school regarding communication with parents supports effective links with the homes of LCA students. Parents are made aware of the nature and purpose of the programme at the first-year information evening and at the third-year open night. When students are identified by the school as likely to benefit from inclusion in LCA, their parents may, as appropriate, be invited to meet the guidance counsellor or the LCA co-ordinators to discuss further the benefits of the programme. In this way parents are involved, with the students, in making the decision regarding the programme that best suits the individual student.

Parents receive meaningful feedback regarding the progress of the students by means of the session results issued by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) in addition to which school reports are issued. Parent-teacher meetings are held annually and letters are issued if a student is at risk of not being awarded a credit due to non-attendance. The school newsletter provides information on the progress of the programme and letters are sent to parents as the need arises to provide additional information.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND CO-ORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The written LCA plan is coherent and forms a very good basis for further development. The plan includes information on the design of the programme in the school, the time allocated to each course, timetables and schedules of work for each of the courses. The schedules of work in most cases consist of the topics to be covered in each session and often as a reference to the module listed in the course descriptor. It is recommended that the materials in the plan that describe the courses be expanded to become course plans and to give a fuller account of the work to be done. These course plans should include information on the teaching methods, strategies and approaches to be adopted when teaching the content. They should be rooted in the basic core principles of LCA. It is recommended that each teacher produce the relevant course plan in digital form for ease of integration with the LCA plan.

It is also recommended that the LCA plan include a programme for each cohort of students. These programmes should lay out the courses, modules and activities planned for that specific class including the details and timing of cross-curricular links, the scheduling of tasks and all other details of the programme for each of the four sessions over the two years. It is likely that there will be minor changes in the programme planned for each class and these variations need to be scheduled in advance.

Two joint co-ordinators form the core programme team and they meet regularly to plan, monitor and evaluate the implementation of the programme. It is recommended that this core team be expanded to include senior management, representatives of guidance and the special educational needs department and one of the teachers of the vocational specialisms.

The programme is evaluated annually in line with good cyclical planning practice. The evaluation is conducted by the co-ordinators in conjunction with the team and students. To further enhance the value of the annual review and evaluation of the programme, it is recommended that the process be expanded to include slightly more formal inputs from parents, students and teachers of LCA, and from other teachers in the school. The degree of formality adopted and year-to-year consistency of review procedures should facilitate comparisons over time.

There is evidence that the programme has benefited from evaluation and review, and it is reported by the school that morale among the students has improved, largely due to the inclusion of more suitable elective modules. These changes have been introduced in the past two years in response to the expressed interests of the students. This responsiveness to change by the LCA co-ordinators and team is a strength of the implementation of the programme in the school.

2.2 Co-ordination

The co-ordinating structures are operating very effectively. The joint co-ordinators liaise closely with school management and the programme teaching team and they are very effective in the discharge of their duties. There is a clear understanding of the aspects of the co-ordinating role in the school and how it operates with regard to students, teachers and the administration of the programme. The co-ordinators' role in relation to the programme is comprehensive and they work very closely together in discharging their duties.

The co-ordinators also work closely with students, teachers and school management to ensure the effective implementation of all aspects of the programme including the scheduling of student tasks and the arrangements for the anchoring of these in appropriate courses. Each of the co-ordinators has timetabled contact with one of the LCA class groups and takes a particular role in respect of the co-ordination of the class taught. This is an effective arrangement.

The co-ordinators carry out their duties in relation to the formal assessment of students thoroughly and effectively including the return of data to the SEC and the organisation of interviews, task assessments and practical tests in the school.

2.3 Curriculum

The curriculum of the programme delivered in the school meets the requirements of the Department of Education and Skills. It is suitably broad and balanced. The needs, interests and abilities of the students are prioritised within the constraints of the available resources.

The vocational specialisms provided are *ICT* and *Hotel Catering and Tourism*. Elective modules are provided from two courses: *Childcare and Community Care* and *Engineering*. These modules are timetabled concurrently and students are provided with a choice. In the case of the Engineering elective modules, the school is providing teaching hours from its own resources. This is a testament to the commitment of the school to prioritise the students' interests. It was noted, however, that the division of students in the elective modules was, at the time of the evaluation, along gender lines. It is urged that this gender division be critically considered when the programme is being reviewed.

German is the European language studied in LCA in the school. In deciding to offer this language, the school took account of the different educational experiences of the students, some of whom will have studied French, the other European language on the school's curriculum, in junior cycle. It displays good planning on the part of the school and the LCA team that an opportunity to introduce German was availed of. This was linked to a teacher's interest in teaching the language and the availability of an exchange programme with a German school. The students in LCA all begin their study of German together on entry to the programme and this is a desirable outcome of this strategy.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

The content of the lessons observed was consistent with the planned programme. The lessons showed that teachers were very well prepared and a range of teaching resources was selected and used effectively. Very effective use was made of relevant and appropriate photocopied materials from various sources including holiday brochures in a *Mathematical Applications* lesson and printed materials from a government website in a *Social Education* lesson dealing with democracy. The whiteboard was widely and effectively employed, most notably to record students' ideas in a mind storming session in one lesson.

However, apart from the obvious case of the ICT vocational specialism, no use was made of ICT for teaching in the lessons observed. While it is acknowledged that ICT may generally be more widely used than in the lessons observed, it is recommended that there be an increased focus on the use of ICT in lesson planning and in teaching.

It was observed in a number of lessons that specific attention was paid to the further development of students' literacy skills. As already mentioned, planning for all lessons should take account of this area and teachers are urged to collaborate in identifying common effective strategies to be deployed in lessons across the curriculum for the support of literacy and numeracy skills development such as the effective use of keyword lists displayed in the classroom, the keeping of

keyword notebooks or folders by the students, and the regular use of dictionaries in the classrooms.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The quality of teaching observed in most of the lessons was good. The lessons were predominantly very well structured and coherently presented. Lessons generally developed at a pace that suited the students.

A range of teaching methods was deployed effectively, including various instances of group work, and this is in line with good pedagogy. Students are presented with opportunities to learn by discovery, and through discussion with their peers, when they engage in various structured group-work activities. These opportunities in particular should be exploited to provide more challenging work for the students. It is suggested, in this context, that students need to be given the opportunity to be wrong at times to exploit the potential for effective learning fully. Teachers should be less willing to provide students with answers, or to give directions, until students have explored all their own resources to come up with an answer. It is urged that teachers should more often adopt the role of facilitators of learning rather than of sources of knowledge or understanding.

Questioning was used often and effectively to move lessons on and to check understanding, however, every effort should be made to increase the opportunities for students to contribute and to have their voice heard. This can be achieved, for instance, by structuring group work so that one student member of the group reports back in a plenary session. All opportunities to let students take the lead in sharing knowledge with their peers should be exploited.

The classrooms visited were at all times bright and welcoming. Subject-related materials on the walls often added to a good physical learning environment which, together with a very good positive atmosphere and the teachers' very good rapport with students, ensured a context that was conducive to learning. Students displayed very positive attitudes to their work and to learning, and this was borne out by the quality of the work they produced in their tasks and key assignments.

3.3 Assessment

Students' work is regularly and formally assessed through the completion of key assignments and student tasks, in line with the assessment requirements of the respective modules of study. Less formally, ongoing oral assessment formed a constant element of the lessons observed. Questioning was commonly used to ascertain students' level of knowledge and understanding, and to confirm effective learning.

There is systematic recording of students' attendance and progress. However, it is recommended that the procedures for recording and storing of key assignments be further standardised. The adoption of standardised procedures for students and teachers in signing off on completed key assignments and in transferring the evidence of completion to central storage should provide added formality that can be used by teachers to encourage timely completion of work by students. It is suggested that the evidence of completion of key assignments when artefacts are produced, as for instance in the case of *Engineering*, could be provided by means of digital photography, whether by camera phone or digital camera. This has the added advantage that it can provide students with opportunities to use their growing knowledge of ICT to produce documents with inserted pictures that might also form part of their ICT work.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- LCA is recognised as important in achieving a suitably differentiated and inclusive provision for students of the school.
- Teachers are encouraged and facilitated within the school to attend relevant continuing professional development sessions.
- The guidance provided in the context of programme choice is appropriate to the needs of the students.
- The additional educational needs of students are well supported within the programme.
- The co-ordinating structures are operating very effectively, the joint co-ordinators liaise closely with school management and the programme teaching team and they discharge their duties very effectively.
- Good planning was displayed in availing of an opportunity to introduce German to the curriculum of the programme.
- Liaison between the LCA team and the SEN team is very good and joint meetings are held regularly.
- Students displayed very positive attitudes to their work and to learning, and this was borne out by the quality of the work they produced in their tasks and key assignments.

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

- The time allocated to some courses, including the ICT vocational specialism and the Arts Education course, should be readjusted.
- The use of ICT should be integrated into the teaching of all LCA courses as a matter of urgency.
- Expanded course plans, including more detailed programmes of work and the related teaching methods should be prepared by teachers and inserted into the LCA plan.
- The LCA plan should include a detailed two-year programme for each cohort of students.
- The core team should be expanded to include key teaching personnel.
- The annual review process should be expanded and formalised to include inputs from parents, students, teachers of LCA and other teachers in the school.
- Appropriate opportunities should be exploited to provide more challenging work for students.
- The procedures for recording and storing of key assignments should be further standardised.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management accepts the report.

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 Board is implementing all the recommendations of the report.