

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Applied
REPORT**

**Marino College
Fairview, Dublin 3
Roll Number: 70250S**

Date of inspection: 15 February 2011



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

EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) in Marino 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.

Marino College is a co-educational school under the auspices of City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC). The school, through its participation in the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) activities, benefits from a range of additional resources and supports to assist in addressing the needs of students who experience educational disadvantage. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

LCA is a well-established senior cycle programme that enjoys a high profile in the school. The large number of students participating in LCA is an indicator of the success of the programme. A whole-school approach is taken to publicising and implementing the programme. LCA features prominently in the school's prospectus and at open evenings. The inclusion in the college handbook of a graduate profile of a LCA student is a commendable means of positively promoting the programme among prospective students. The LCA notice board in the school foyer includes colorful photographic displays of student activities. It is particularly noteworthy that student achievement is acknowledged through the *Student of the Month* roll of honour also included on the notice board. 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.

School staff and management are promoting a whole-school approach to literacy and numeracy. This work is being undertaken as part of the school's engagement with DEIS action planning and is being led by a literacy and numeracy sub-committee. The committee has identified LCA as a key programme that can build on the literacy and numeracy strategies that are already undertaken as part of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP). Whole-staff in-service is being organised to progress this work and LCA teachers have been asked to identify key literacy strategies that could be used in all LCA lessons. This is a very worthwhile initiative. To ensure cohesive planning between the JCSP and LCA core teams it is recommended that the LCA co-ordinator be included as a member of the literacy and numeracy sub-committee.

Systematic procedures are in place to facilitate programme evaluation. Each year all LCA participants complete a survey and teachers complete a SWOT analysis of LCA to identify the strengths and weaknesses of programme implementation and to inform ongoing development of

the programme in the school. Planning documentation indicated that very good progress has been made in a number of aspects previously identified as having scope for development. This is indicative of very good self-evaluative practice. Current priorities include raising student expectations and reducing rates of absenteeism. To progress these priorities it is recommended that a mechanism to include parents in the annual programme review and follow-up actions be considered.

1.2 Resources

Very good practice is evident in the deployment of staff to LCA. Each year teachers are invited to express their preferences for teaching particular programmes and deliberate efforts are made by senior management to accommodate such requests. Teachers new to the programme are facilitated to attend relevant continuing professional development (CPD) and there is a very good level of engagement with relevant in-service. This has proved effective in supporting programme implementation. It is suggested that a copy of the information supplied at each in-service course attended be filed in a programme-specific CPD folder. This would ensure that the information is available to each member of the team and could be referred to when required. The quality of support new teachers receive from colleagues on the LCA team and from within their subject department has been consistently recognised as a key strength in the annual programme review completed by teachers.

The LCA timetable does not fulfill the requirements of Department of Education and Skills Circular Letter M29/95. A shortfall of over two hour's tuition time is apparent from an analysis of the timetable. 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. As part of this re-configuration the number of periods assigned to all components of the programme should be reviewed. Particular attention should be given to the timetable for Thursday afternoon. While the more effective use of the last two periods each Thursday is noted for this term, the current arrangements remain too loose as some of the activities planned will not last the full academic year. In the context of supporting the literacy and numeracy additional classes in these areas could be considered.

It was noted that guest speakers are occasionally used to support students' learning in LCA. To optimise the potential of such activities and ensure consistent practice it is recommended that a whole-school policy on the use of guest speakers in line with Circular Letter 0023/2010 be devised.

A very good range of resources is available to support programme implementation and co-ordination. Students have appropriate access to well-equipped specialist rooms, including information and communications technology (ICT). In recent years the school has funded the provision of laptops for each student entering first year. This means that the current fifth-year students have exceptionally good access to ICT. To encourage optimal student participation in LCA activities, the school supports the students in a number of ways, for example by providing all the ingredients for practical lessons in Hotel, Catering and Tourism and by subsidising the additional costs that students may have to incur for other programme activities. These inclusive practices are indicative of the level of care provided to students in the college.

1.3 Student selection and support

A systematic student selection process for LCA is in place. There is a good level of collaboration between relevant staff to support this process. It is noteworthy that, as part of a revised selection

process, future applicants will be required to complete an application form outlining their reasons for applying for admission to the programme and that the guidance counselor will be actively involved in the process. Evidence gathered during the evaluation indicates that the criteria used for enrolling a student who transfers from another school into LCA need to be reviewed. It is recommended therefore that these transition procedures be closely examined to ensure that senior cycle students who are new to the school are accessing the curriculum programme most appropriate to their needs. It would prove beneficial to include the general criteria used by the school for admission into LCA in its overall admissions policy.

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 student-destination survey is carried out annually and this indicates that an increasing proportion of LCA students are transferring to further education courses.

There is a very good level of ongoing collaboration between the learning support co-ordinator and the LCA team. It is particularly good practice that the learning support co-ordinator liaises regularly with the year head and teachers of LCA to track and review individual students' progress.

1.4 Home-school and community links

There is regular contact between school and parents in relation to programme activities. It is particularly good practice that the parents of fifth-year LCA students meet with the home-school-community-liaison co-ordinator and the programme co-ordinators as part of the induction process. Parents receive feedback on students' progress at the annual parent-teacher meeting and through the normal school reports. Additional letters are issued as required.

The home-school-community liaison co-ordinator takes an active role in supporting the parents as the students' progress through LCA through for example home visits when required. There is a very good level of collaboration with relevant staff to support this process. It is particularly noteworthy that some parents of LCA students are active participants of the parents group established by the home-school-community-liaison co-ordinator.

Student absenteeism and punctuality impact negatively on levels of student attainment. This area, which has also been noted as a cause of concern in the annual programme reviews, has been prioritised by the school as part of their DEIS action plan. A number of additional strategies have been put in place in an effort to improve attendance. As part of this process the school now operates a texting service providing ongoing communication between home and school. Initial indications suggest that this strategy is working well. Such practices are very praiseworthy.

The school has established very good links with the local community. These include a number of productive links with businesses in the community to support activities such as work experience and a student mentoring programme.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

Programme planning is the responsibility of the entire LCA team of twenty-eight teachers which is led by the programme co-ordinator. Management facilitates meetings of the entire team three times during the year. During the evaluation it was apparent that team members are very committed to LCA and displayed a high level of enthusiasm for the continued development of the programme in the school. Planning for each LCA module remains the responsibility of the relevant subject department in the school. This very good practice has enabled each subject team to take collaborative responsibility for planning for LCA. This in turn builds capacity and enables the teaching of LCA to be rotated among subject team members. Programme plans reviewed during the evaluation are generally very well developed. In a number of subject areas, the plans outlined the content to be covered in each year of the course. This information was summarized into thematic units of work that included an outline of students' expected knowledge and understanding in terms of learning outcomes. Specific learning activities together with information on the summative and formative assessment strategies to be deployed in each area of study were also included. This is very good practice.

Leadership and management of the programme are delegated to a programme co-ordinator and a care team. The care team comprises the LCA year head, tutors, guidance counselor, Home-School-Community-Liaison co-ordinator and the learning support co-ordinator. The good work of this team ensures that a cohesive and informed approach is taken to the care of students in LCA. The team meets weekly and records are now being kept of each meeting and filed in the programme plan. This is good practice. It was noted from the records reviewed that these meetings primarily revolve around student-care issues. To progress priorities such as challenging student expectations and raising literacy and numeracy standards as identified in the school's most recent programme evaluation, it is recommended that the terms of reference of this group be amended. This group should be renamed a core planning group and the terms of reference be expanded to include a sharper focus on collaborative and integrated planning for teaching and learning across the LCA components. The combined expertise of this team would be well placed to lead this work. Some members of the team have considerable expertise in implementing the JSCP teaching strategies. This should support the planned follow-through and further development of these strategies into LCA in line with the school's DEIS planning priority. In the context of next year's timetable it is recommended that the LCA programme co-ordinator be made available to attend this weekly meeting.

The LCA planning folder is very well developed and contains many of the necessary components. The mechanism for formal evaluation has facilitated some very good levels of reflective practice. As a next step it is recommended that the core planning group decides on a small number of areas to progress in the short term. An action plan that includes specific targets and identifies the personnel responsible to address each area should be devised.

Cross-curricular linkages are supported primarily through the completion of student tasks. There is scope to extend and further develop such linkages. It is recommended that the core planning team investigates possible synergies that exist across subject areas. Common areas of the course should be routinely discussed at team meetings and agreed approaches to the delivery of common topics should be devised. The inside cover page of module descriptor booklets is a useful starting point to highlight possible overlaps and facilitate collaboration. A copy of the two-year programme plan for each subject should also be included in the LCA planning folder. This will further assist the core planning team to exploit synergies and identify cross-curricular linkages to optimise learning.

2.2 Co-ordination

The programme is co-ordinated by a programme co-ordinator who holds an assistant-principal post of responsibility and a special-duties teacher who acts as LCA year head. The programme co-ordinator took up the position this year and is actively engaged with relevant CPD. Both members of staff are very committed to the task and have a very good knowledge of the programme and its implementation. As the programme co-ordinator settles into the role there will be scope to refine the duties between the year head and the programme co-ordinator. The year head has timetabled contact with all LCA groups while the programme co-ordinator has timetabled contact with two class groups. This practice facilitates regular contact with students of the programme. The co-ordinator and year head maintain a very good level of communication with relevant staff and school management.

2.3 Curriculum

The school has the capacity to offer a wide range of LCA subjects and the vocational specialisms offered have changed over time. It was noted from students' responses to the survey issued as part of the school's programme review that they would have preferred some element of choice in the subjects offered. In this context the feasibility of offering a wider range of subjects should be considered. The school could consider providing 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. Given the fact that there are generally two class groups of LCA in each year, the feasibility of concurrently timetabling two vocational specialisms or electives, as option blocks, could also be considered.

There is scope to adjust the spread of lessons across the teaching week in a number of subjects. For instance, one class group has three single lessons of Social Education on the same day. There are other subjects where the weekly tuition is spread over two consecutive days. These arrangements impact negatively on continuity in teaching and learning and students' progress, particularly if they are absent on those days. This issue should be addressed in the context of future timetabling. As part of the annual programme review teachers should be invited to give feedback on timetabling issues that arise to inform ongoing planning.

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. 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. To support ongoing planning it is recommended that the co-ordinator maintains a database of work placements.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Good quality advance planning and preparation was evident for all of the lessons observed. Lesson content was in keeping with module requirements and clear learning outcomes were articulated. Best practice was evident in instances where the range of teaching and assessment strategies

subsequently chosen for the lesson supported deep levels of learning among students and allowed for appropriate levels of differentiation. It is recommended that all teachers be mindful of carefully aligning the range of teaching and assessment strategies chosen to the learning objectives to be achieved in each lesson.

Some very good levels of reflective practice were evident in individual teachers' planning folders. In some instances teachers noted personal reflections on each lesson and noted strategies that proved particularly effective. It is recommended that this very good practice be extended. Teachers should use their subject plan as a working document to note the resources used and teaching and assessment strategies that proved particularly effective. This information should be discussed at team meetings and used to inform ongoing planning for teaching and learning.

3.2 Learning and teaching

All lessons had a clear focus and a good structure. At times there was scope to adjust the pace or pitch to a level more commensurate with students' needs. Learning outcomes were shared with students at the outset of most lessons. This strategy proved very effective in focusing students' attention and in ensuring that they understood the relevance of the content being studied. However, the full potential of this strategy was fully realised only in those lessons where the outcomes were revisited at the end of the lesson. This gave students the opportunity to reflect on their learning and provided teachers with an opportunity to provide further clarification and to affirm effort. It is recommended that learning outcomes are discussed with students at the start of all lessons and that these outcomes are revisited during the closing stages as a means of assessing and affirming students' progress.

In all of the lessons observed learning and teaching took place in a secure, calm and supportive environment. A very good rapport was apparent between teachers and students, and a climate of respect was evident. Deliberate efforts were made by teachers to ensure that explanations of new content were clear, accurate and contextualised. Some good use was made of ICT to support learning. Digital presentations that incorporated relevant visual images proved most effective in supporting deep levels of learning. Best practice in the use of digital presentations occurred in instances where students were given a copy of the slides to retain in their folders, rather than having to transcribe information from the slides into their notebooks.

In a few lessons good attention was paid to supporting students' literacy development. For instance in a social education lesson observed students were pre-taught key terms used in classified advertisements for various types of accommodation. This ensured that students were able to complete the group task subsequently assigned. In another lesson where students were completing a business plan the teacher made sure that students, when answering questions, continued to use the correct terminology associated with the topic. In a number of lessons, however, there was scope to further develop strategies to support students' literacy and to support deeper learning. To complement the whole-school approach to literacy and numeracy it is recommended that strategies be incorporated into all lessons that would support students to acquire, understand and use the necessary technical language to access the curriculum. The outcomes of the recently-completed student skills audit should assist teachers in their choice of strategies selected.

Some very good examples of well-managed group work were observed during the evaluation. A particularly good example occurred in a lesson where students, in preparation for a key assignment, had to prepare a business plan. In carrying out this task, the students displayed a remarkable ability to work together and support their peers who were not as far advanced with the

project. A high level of in-class monitoring and subsequent plenary sessions enabled the teacher to support each group in completing the task. It was noted that students had to record in their copybooks what they had learned in class. This very good practice encourages students to critically reflect on their efforts. In some of the other lessons there was an over-reliance on teacher-led activity. This restricted opportunities for students to actively engage with the lesson content and limited opportunities for teachers to assess individual students' actual understanding of the lesson content. To support the teaching principles underpinning LCA it is recommended that the core planning team gives further consideration to the use of active teaching methodologies in lessons.

Observation of class activities and interaction by the inspector with students indicated that they are making progress in LCA and a high level of ICT skills was particularly evident. Students are very well supported in completing the range of student LCA tasks. In all subject areas there is an agreed system for storing materials from lessons. However, it is recommended that the LCA team reviews the system for storing and using these notebooks. In all lessons observed it was noted that teachers take complete responsibility for storing students' class work and that no work is taken home by students. While the contextual factors that led to this arrangement are acknowledged it does merit review. It is very important that students are encouraged to record key points of information covered in lessons and systematically store worksheets, handouts and evaluation sheets used. However, this needs to be balanced with strategies that encourage learner autonomy and enable students to see the usefulness of their written work as a tool to support learning outside of the classroom setting.

3.3 Assessment

Very good summative assessment practices are evident in LCA. Students sit end-of-term examinations and very good use is made of past examination papers issued by the State Examinations Commission in setting in-house examinations. Some very high quality corrections of in-house examinations were noted in students' folders. Where applicable the range of assessment modes used at summer and Christmas, and for the mock examinations, includes an assessment of students oral, aural or practical competencies. These are very good practices.

Very good attention is paid to monitoring students' attendance and to recording the completion of key assignments in order to assign credits in accordance with programme requirements. It was evident during the evaluation that student absenteeism continues to impact negatively on overall levels of attainment in LCA, particularly among fifth-year students. The work of the LCA co-ordinator, year head and tutors and Home-School-Community-Liaison co-ordinator in assisting with tracking and monitoring attainment is noteworthy. It is very important that the effectiveness of the recently introduced attendance strategies be kept under close review by school management and relevant staff.

Some further consideration needs to be given to the formative assessment strategies used in LCA. Questioning was used in all lessons to make links with previous learning and to check levels of understanding. Given the full range of student abilities in LCA, there was additional scope in the lessons observed to challenge students further to assess understanding and to incorporate some higher-order questions in order to foster deeper levels of understanding and application of learning. LCA students tend not to be assigned homework activities. Yet in some of the lessons observed a simple home task would have provided an ideal opportunity to allow students reflect on and apply the classroom learning. The subsequent correction of this work would provide an additional opportunity for teachers to provide constructive feedback to individual students.

A review of some students' folders and copybooks indicated that on occasions they are required to complete some very good reflective exercises and worksheet activities that seek to check students understanding, application and critical appraisal of lessons content. In one subject student exercises relating to various grammatical points were corrected regularly. This is good practice. While teachers provide a high level of in-class monitoring and oral feedback to students in general there was limited evidence of teacher correction, feedback or affirmation on students' written work contained in the folders or completed as part of key assignments.

To enhance practice it is recommended that the LCA core team reviews formative assessment practices in line with the whole-school assessment policy and implements strategies across the programme. To support learning and to assess progress effectively students need to be provided with further opportunities to complete written activities or independent activities that are appropriately differentiated which can be taken up and monitored by class teachers. Consideration should be given to the use of comment-only marking and other Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategies as a means of providing constructive feedback to students and supporting them to reach their full potential.

The LCA team makes very good efforts to recognise and celebrate student achievement. The student of the month award is a particularly effective system. Students and their parents like the fact that good work and good attendance are acknowledged through the issuing of certificates, letters and inclusion of photographs in the school newsletter.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- LCA is a well-established senior cycle programme that enjoys a high profile in the school. A whole-school approach is taken to publicising and implementing the programme.
- Systematic procedures are in place to facilitate programme evaluation and very good progress has been made in a number of aspects previously identified as having scope for development.
- Teachers new to the programme are facilitated to attend relevant continuing professional development (CPD) and there is a very good level of engagement with relevant in-service.
- A very good range of resources is available to support programme implementation and co-ordination.
- The school has established very good links with the local community to facilitate programme implementation and a very good level of collaboration among relevant staff supports student participation.
- Programme planning for each LCA module remains the responsibility of the relevant subject department team and good quality programme planning was evident.
- The programme is co-ordinated by a programme co-ordinator and the LCA year head, both of whom are very committed to the task and have a very good knowledge of the programme and its implementation.
- In all of the lessons observed learning and teaching took place in a secure, calm and supportive environment.
- Observation of class activities and interaction by the inspector with students indicated that they are making progress in LCA and a high level of ICT skills was particularly evident. Students are very well supported in completing the range of student LCA tasks.

- Very good summative assessment practices are evident in LCA.
- The LCA team makes very good efforts to recognise and celebrate student achievement.

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.
- The LCA care team should be re-named a core planning team and its terms of reference expanded to include a sharper focus on collaborative and integrated planning for teaching and learning across the LCA components.
- The LCA programme co-ordinator should be a member of the literacy and numeracy sub-committee and strategies should be incorporated into all lessons that would support students to acquire, understand and use the necessary technical language to access the curriculum.
- Existing formative assessment practices in LCA should be reviewed.

Published June 2011