An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED REPORT

Ardscoil Mhuire
Corbally, Limerick
Roll Number: 64290V

Date of inspection: 12 May 2010
EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the LCA in Ardscoil Mhuire. 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, the deputy principal, the programme co-ordinator 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.

As a Sisters of Mercy school, Ardscoil Mhuire is under the trusteeship of the trustee body CEIST, Catholic Education an Irish Schools Trust. Ardscoil Mhuire is a voluntary secondary school for girls from Corbally and surrounding areas. The school has a long history of educational provision in the area and it traces its origins to the first Mercy convent founded by Catherine McCauley in Limerick in 1883. The school sets itself the mission of providing a Christian environment where all persons are valued and assisted to reach their full potential. The school operates within the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The support provided by the whole school for the Leaving Certificate Applied programme is of a very high standard. This support is maintained by the very effective leadership of the principal with the close collaboration of the LCA co-ordinator and the whole staff. The programme benefits from the recognition by the whole school community of its central place in the curriculum and educational provision of the school. LCA has a positive profile in the school and activities of students, including those related to LCA tasks and completion of key assignments, are publicised within the school and through the school’s newsletter.

Teachers new to the programme are provided with induction support by the co-ordinator and the whole programme team. A large proportion of the teachers in the school are involved in the delivery of LCA and teachers new to the programme benefit from the wide experience of the staff in this regard. Senior management and the programme team are encouraged to include a more formal induction path in the LCA plan. This induction should emphasise the underlying key principles of the LCA programme as presented in programme documentation. This documentation can be accessed at http://lca.slss.ie.

1.2 Resources

Teaching staff are assigned to teach the programme in line with their qualifications and interests. The timetable is appropriately structured and the minimum time requirements for teaching the
courses in each subject are fulfilled. It is a requirement of the programme that the guidance modules of the Vocational Preparation and Guidance course are delivered by a qualified guidance counsellor.

Information and communications technology (ICT) is used by students throughout the programme. There are ample periods allocated for timetabled lessons in the computer room. The use of ICT is also an integrated element in most courses. While the use of ICT by students is of a high order, it is recommended that, as resources allow, all possibilities of increasing the use if ICT in a teaching context in the classroom be explored, including the use of data projectors to diversify further the students’ learning experience.

The approach adopted by management and the team to continuous professional development (CPD) in the context of the programme is very positive. Teachers are facilitated and encouraged to take part in the CPD opportunities presented through the LCA support service of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). The professional development of the teachers has also benefited from their involvement in CPD provided in the context of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP). The professional skills developed in this context, particularly in the support of literacy and numeracy, are being applied effectively in LCA. This is evidence of a healthy whole-school approach to staff professional development. In line with good practice, teachers’ participation in specific CPD is recorded in some of the individual course plans. To facilitate further added value being derived from CPD activity, the LCA plan should include a central record of CPD sessions attended to aid further dissemination of information among the programme team. This record can be a valuable resource for the whole LCA team if it is suitably detailed.

1.3 Student selection and support

Very effective support is provided for all parents and students regarding programme choice, including LCA. Provision of information on the nature and availability of the LCA programme in the school begins from enrolment. The programme is introduced at the first-year open night prior to entry. Relevant information is again presented at the end of first-year when students are making their junior-cycle subject choices. The presentation delivered to students at this time includes information on senior-cycle programme choices. Parents are fully involved in the process of programme selection. They attend an information evening on senior-cycle programme options for parents and students in third year and this further supports them in their involvement.

In addition to the formalised presentation of information, parents and students are also supported on an individual basis in making the appropriate choice of programme. The appropriateness of the LCA for individual students is considered, particularly by the guidance counsellor, the SEN department and the principal, throughout junior cycle. When it is judged that this programme is the most suitable option for a student, the parents and student are made aware of this and are provided with full information and comprehensive guidance to support them in making their decision.

The additional educational needs of students in LCA are met, in line with good practice, within an integrated, whole-school system of learning support and resource provision. The educational needs of all students are determined efficiently and the further expansion of regular testing is planned for the tracking of learners’ progress, particularly of the development of their literacy skills. The additional educational needs of all students, including students of LCA, are normally discussed and reviewed at weekly meetings of the special educational needs team. This reflects good planning practice.
1.4 Home-school links

Good practice is followed with regard to establishing and maintaining strong and active links between the school and the LCA students’ homes. Ongoing contact with parents provides continued awareness of the nature and purpose of the programme. In addition to the formal presentations at information evenings, including options evenings, meetings are arranged with parents about a month after students begin the programme to deal with any concerns or queries that might arise. These meetings take place at a coffee morning at which samples of students’ work are presented and discussed. This approach presents a valuable opportunity for parents to engage with the programme and to strengthen their involvement with the programme. Parents are invited to LCA task-related events and play an active part in the involvement of the whole-school community in LCA activities. Contact is maintained by telephone and post as opportunities are presented. Meetings are arranged with parents by the LCA co-ordinator or guidance counsellor as required and the home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator plays an active part in maintaining the links with parents.

Parents are provided with regular feedback on students’ progress by means of school reports and parent-teacher meetings. Feedback on students’ progress is further enriched through other channels of communication, by letter, telephone and direct contact by the LCA co-ordinator or HSCL co-ordinator, as the need arises.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

Planning for LCA is well advanced in the school and provides a consistent and well defined framework for the organisation and implementation of the programme. There is a current written LCA plan which is well suited to its purpose. The plan is complemented by the school’s LCA planning folder which is available in the staffroom to all teachers. This planning folder includes the individual course plans which are generally of very good quality and provide appropriate programmes of work to cover particular modules of course content. Taken as a whole, the written planning documentation is comprehensive. There are some particularly detailed sections of the documentation such as the policy on work experience. This is a whole-school policy, applied to work experience in each of the programmes where it occurs, that shows the integrated nature of planning within Ardscoil Mhuire. This integrated approach to meeting the needs of students is a strength of planning in this school.

The very good structure seen in planning documentation can be further improved by adding to the section of the planning folder that deals with special educational needs, clarifying the role of the special needs assistants and providing more detail regarding teaching methodologies. This work should be undertaken collaboratively and will in many instances involve the description of current practice which is found by the LCA team to be very effective.

Planning, monitoring and evaluation of the programme is undertaken by an active LCA core team which meets monthly. This core team is appropriately representative of the school and the LCA team as a whole and its functions are discharged to a high standard. Membership of the core team
includes senior management, teachers with responsibility for guidance, HSCL and work experience and the programme co-ordinator, who also teaches a vocational specialism. The work of the core team is commendably supplemented by smaller groups meeting less formally to deal with issues such as LCA task co-ordination and cross-curricular planning.

Appropriate planning is effective in facilitating the required cross-curricular elements of the programme while also providing for a range of activities, often linked to the Craft and Design specialism, which integrate students’ learning across subjects including, for example, Gaeilge Chumarsáideach.

The programme is reviewed and evaluated on an annual basis, in line with good practice. This annual evaluation is conducted under the guidance of the LCA co-ordinator and involves the principal, the school secretary, the LCA co-ordinator and the guidance counsellor. The evaluation tends to be concerned with well defined areas of programme organisation including the specialisms and the elective modules chosen, timetabling, time allocation for LCA task completion, and the grouping of periods for practical lessons in art and information technology. This focused, pragmatic approach to programme review and evaluation is effective in producing clear outcomes and identifying well defined targets for improvement.

Good practice is also seen in the involvement of teachers, parents and students in programme review and evaluation, although this is done in a less formal way. To further the collaborative nature of programme review and evaluation, each of the interested parties should be involved more formally, including students, parents, the programme team and those teachers not involved currently in teaching the programme. It is urged that a consistent model of review be adopted, perhaps using consistent questionnaires or other methods of gathering meaningful information, so that outcomes from year to year can be compared. This approach will be particularly useful in ascertaining if actions taken have had the desired outcomes.

In addition to the foregoing recommended actions at programme level, practice regarding review and evaluation of each of the courses that comprise the programme curriculum in the school should be similarly structured. A principal aim of this review and evaluation should be to provide a basis for changes to course content, sequencing and methods of delivery in response to changing circumstances.

While there has been little change in the programme on the basis of past review and evaluation, there is evidence that this is as a result of the appropriateness and success of the programme in its present form. This overall success of the programme in meeting its objectives should be confirmed and fully acknowledged as a result of more formal and broadly-based collaborative review and evaluation.

### 2.2 Co-ordination

Formal programme co-ordination structures are in place in the school and these are operating very effectively. It is to the credit of the school, both management and teaching team, and particularly to the credit of the LCA co-ordinator, that these structures have been judiciously maintained to the benefit of the students concerned. The LCA co-ordinator is facilitated, by appropriate allocation of resources, in the performance of the co-ordinator’s role. As an integral part of this role, the co-ordinator maintains very good communications with school management and with the students involved. The role of the co-ordinator with regard to the leadership of the students is, in line with recommended good practice, further strengthened by having ample timetabled contact with each of the three LCA classes.
2.3 Curriculum

The programme curriculum in the school complies fully with LCA requirements. The two vocational specialisms provided are Craft and Design and Childcare and Community Care. The requirements for elective modules are fulfilled by modules of Religious Education and Science. Appropriate consideration is given to the needs, interests and abilities of the students in the design of the curriculum within the constraints of staffing and other resources. The mix of vocational specialisms and elective modules provide well for the personal and vocational needs of the students.

It is commended that the issue of gender equality is dealt with in various contexts within planning for the programme and its delivery. It is urged that this good planning practice be reflected in the planning documentation, providing more formal provision for gender mainstreaming in programme planning and implementation.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

The planning of teachers for the implementation of the programme, seen in the course plans, is consistent with the aims and objectives of LCA. The lessons observed in the course of the evaluation also indicated that good lesson preparation and planning are the norm. These lessons were consistent with the programmes of work included in the course plans and with the appropriate LCA module descriptors.

Planning for the availability and use of resources, including materials and equipment in practical lessons, was generally effective and appropriate use of photocopied materials and the whiteboard was observed. It is urged that the use of ICT as a teaching resource, including the use of web-based and other digital materials, be explored and further developed as resources permit. Suitable digital materials and web addresses should be appropriately listed in the programme plan and individual course plans as a means of encouraging greater use of such resources.

As a next step in planning for the further improvement of teaching and learning in LCA in the school, it is suggested that the programme team should engage in structured comparison and discussion of successful methodologies at team meetings. The aim of such discussion should be the sharing of current good practice among teachers and the identification of strategies and methodologies that have potential for further improving the students’ educational experience. The outcomes of the discussions should be included in course plans and be linked where appropriate to specific course content.

In line with good practice, there is close liaison between the teachers of the programme and the special educational needs team. Learning support is commendably integrated into the work of the school and LCA is part of this integrated approach. The School Completion Programme (SCP) in the school plays a positive part in the support of students in the LCA programme, notably providing activities for students who are exempted from the study of Gaeilge.
3.2 Learning and teaching

The lessons observed in the course of the evaluation were predominantly coherently structured and the quality of teaching and learning was good or very good. The aims of the lessons were in all cases made clear from the outset. On occasion, in line with good practice, expected learning outcomes were shared with the students. Increased clarity concerning the expected learning outcomes of a lesson, including agreeing these with students at the beginning of the lesson, should be used more widely. The revisiting of the expected outcomes at the conclusion of the lesson provides a valuable further opportunity to reinforce learning.

The pace of the lessons was appropriate for the students. A variety of teaching methodologies and strategies was used to maximise the interest of students and to facilitate the use of active teaching and learning methodologies, a key principle of the LCA programme. In most cases, the work being undertaken by the students provided an appropriate level of challenge to maintain their interest while assuring the prospect of success.

Effective learning was facilitated in the lessons observed. This was evident in the level of understanding and knowledge that students displayed in their interactions with teachers and their peers, and in their responses to questioning. The high level of student engagement with their work was a further indication of effective learning being facilitated. Student engagement and effective learning were displayed particularly clearly in a lesson where students undertook role-plays they had prepared for class, dealing with discrimination and the denial of human rights. The role-plays were followed by class discussion that provided opportunities for the exploration of ideas of justice and equality and also for development of the students’ sense of self-esteem. This lesson also provided for the development of students’ social skills as well as their verbal and language skills. The LCA students in general showed appropriately developed skills and competencies in the completion of their work, key assignments and tasks, and in the appropriate recording of this work.

Good practice was seen in a number of lessons with regard to the support of students’ literacy and numeracy development. Literacy supports such as the use of keyword list have been adapted from the approaches used in JCSP, which are already familiar to many of the students. It is urged that the use of such literacy and numeracy supports should become universal and that teachers should adopt common approaches and practices where possible. The display of new terminology and phraseology in classrooms should form a constant part of literacy support.

The atmosphere in the lessons observed was appropriately relaxed while remaining focused on the planned outcomes. Interactions between teachers and students, and among the students themselves, were clearly based on mutual respect and this ensured that lessons took place in a setting that was positive and conducive to learning.

The students were very positive with regard to their involvement in the LCA programme and this was discerned in their approach to their work in the lessons observed and also through their interaction with the inspector. They displayed positive attitudes to learning, based on their sense of achievement and success, and were developing a sense of personal responsibility for their own learning. Teachers consistently praised students for their achievement and encouraged them to reach high standards. Classroom management was effective in each of the lessons observed.
Discipline was sensitively maintained and the teachers’ expectations of students were clear and consistent.

While the organisation of the classrooms often facilitated student-centred teaching approaches this was not always the case. Teachers are urged, where this is not already happening, to organise the LCA classrooms to suit the use of more active teaching methodologies, the organisation of students into groups and regular reordering of groups and activities. This is a pre-requisite when implementing some of the key principles of LCA which call for team work and the use of a range of active teaching and learning methodologies.

3.3 Assessment

The work of the LCA students is assessed regularly, both formally and informally. The formal assessment follows the requirements of the programme. Students complete key assignments in line with the provisions of the relevant module descriptors in each course. In addition to the official results for each session, issued by the State Examinations Commission, comment-based school reports are provided at Christmas, in summer and at mid-terms, providing a good channel for meaningful communication with parents and students and a more complete indication of the progress being made. This is good practice.

Informal assessment of students’ progress is an integral part of teaching and learning within the LCA programme in the school. In the lessons observed, teachers were seen to provide appropriate affirmation of students’ progress. Through judicious questioning, teachers regularly assessed students’ progress and provided opportunities for affirmation. The approaches adopted were consistent with good assessment for learning (AfL) practice. It is urged that further development of AfL be undertaken, with reference to the approaches detailed at [http://www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie), and included in planned assessment procedures for each of the LCA courses.

Evidence of completion of key assignments is recorded and stored systematically. However, it is recommended that the procedure for signing off on students’ key-assignment work be standardised for all courses and that evidence of completion of the key assignment be stored centrally from the end of the session in which the key assignment has been completed. Thus, when a module is complete, the evidence should be passed to the co-ordinator for filing together with the appropriately documented record.

Appropriate emphasis is placed on regular attendance by students, further encouraged by the supports provided through SCP. Teachers keep individual records of attendance and these are carefully monitored to ensure that the mandatory attendance level is reached when awarding credits for a module. Students’ attendance is also recorded and monitored centrally and good attendance is encouraged and supported in line with LCA principles and good practice.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The support provided by the whole school for the Leaving Certificate Applied programme is of a very high standard.
- The approach adopted by management and the LCA team to continuing professional development is very positive.
• Well advanced planning provides a consistent and well defined framework for the organisation and implementation of the programme.
• Formal programme co-ordination structures are in place in the school and these are operating very effectively.
• The quality of teaching and learning observed in the course of the evaluation was good or very good.

As a means of building on these strengths the following key recommendations are made:
• The guidance modules of the Vocational Preparation and Guidance course should be delivered by a qualified guidance counsellor.
• All possibilities of increasing the use if ICT for teaching in the classroom should be explored as resources allow.
• The procedure for signing off on students’ key-assignment work should be standardised for all courses and evidence of completion of the key assignment should be stored centrally.

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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 welcomes the recommendations of the LCA Inspection Report. The recommendations reflect the priorities of the school and LCA Programme. The Board is pleased with the strengths highlighted particularly the very effective co-ordination structure and the good and very good quality teaching and learning.

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

Following the recommendations the Board of Management acknowledges the timely and significant ICT grant from the Department of Education & Skills and fundraising by school community, which made it possible for all learning areas including LCA rooms to become e-learning environments with desktops, digital projectors and wireless internet connection.

A centre for storage of all key assignments has been arranged and standardised signing off for key assignments is now procedure. A qualified Guidance Counsellor delivers the guidance modules of the Vocational Preparation and Guidance and one to one contact with all LCA students.