Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
REPORT

Arklow Community College,
Coolgreaney Road,
Arklow, Co. Wicklow.
Roll Number: 70740M

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EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE VOCATIONAL PROGRAMME (LCVP)

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the LCVP in Arklow Community College. It presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for the further development of the programme in the school. During the evaluation, the inspector held meetings with the school principal, a core group of teachers and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector liaised extensively with the programme co-ordinator and visited classrooms to observe teaching and learning. The inspector provided oral feedback to teachers on lessons observed. The inspector also examined students’ work and reviewed relevant documentation pertaining to the programme, as well as teachers’ written preparation. The outcomes of the evaluation were discussed with the school principal, the deputy principal, the programme co-ordinator and the core team at the end of the evaluation period.

The school offers a range of subjects and programmes to meet the needs of its cohort of students: the Junior Certificate, the Junior Certificate School Programme, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), the established Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational (LCVP) programme. The LCVP is long established in the school and forms a central strand of the school’s curriculum. The aims and objectives of the programme are linked to the mission statement of the school and the inclusion of the LCVP, a programme designed to enhance the vocational dimension of the established Leaving Certificate, on the school’s curriculum helps to achieve its objectives. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole-school support

Senior management is commended for its visible commitment to the programme. This is exemplified in the teaching team made available, the most important resource for the programme, and in the generous allocation of time to its implementation. Senior management has deployed teachers to the LCVP teaching team that have a complementary set of skills and expertise to ensure the successful implementation of all aspects of the programme in the school. The specialisms of Business, Guidance and information and communication technologies (ICT) are represented within the team. This is very good practice. The skills, qualities and expertise of the individual teachers are acknowledged.

School management facilitates LCVP team members’ participation in continuing professional development (CPD) through attendance at relevant second level support service (SLSS) courses and engagement with the LCVP Teacher Professional Network (TPN). Teachers reported how they have benefited from CPD through gaining an enhanced understanding and appreciation of the LCVP and learning about suitable teaching methodologies. Whole-staff CPD is also planned through the school’s participation with their Business in the Community Ireland (BITCI) partner company, a pilot programme being run for participating schools.
In the absence of the transition year (TY) on the school’s curriculum, the value of the LCVP to students is recognised by senior management. The school participates in the School Support Programme under DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) and receives a number of supports, and as such, caters for a large number of students that can benefit greatly from the different types of learning experienced through the programme. LCVP facilitates the development of a range of skills and competencies and the wider body of senior cycle students of the school are provided with enhanced opportunities for personal development and self-awareness. For example, all sixth-year students, regardless of programme choice, attend lessons in the Link Modules, in order to provide equal access to career guidance, work skills and ICT skills. While this is a laudable objective, the work of the Link Modules’ teachers at this stage in the course will necessarily require an increased focus on strategies for examination preparation. Therefore, it is suggested that school management explore the possibility of providing the additional skills development to all students in year one rather than year two of the programme.

The programme is viewed very positively in the school. One of the main advantages of running the programme is the greater awareness in the community of the school through work experience placements and through the links fostered with local businesses.

1.2 Resources

The time allocation to the programme is very good and the additional allocation received for the LCVP is used to provide comprehensive delivery of the many aspects of the LCVP. The lessons in the Link Modules are assigned three forty-minute periods in year one and in year two, so that LCVP students receive two periods for Enterprise and one period for Preparation for the World of Work in both fifth and sixth year. In addition, LCVP students receive two timetabled periods in Computer Studies in fifth and sixth year dedicated to the development of ICT skills and the completion of portfolio items. These are integral requirements of the programme and core to its success.

In fifth year, however, lessons in the Link Modules are currently timetabled at the same time as lessons for Physical Education (PE), denying LCVP students access to PE. This should be avoided, and senior management should review this arrangement for coming years. The possibility, as mentioned above, of providing the Link Modules for all students in fifth year or alternatively, placing the Link Modules for LCVP students concurrent with Computer Studies for non-LCVP students should be considered by school management.

There is full support from senior management in terms of acquisition of resources and materials required for the programme. There is an LCVP notice board in the staff room for dissemination of relevant information and space for storage of programme-related resources. Through the school’s intranet, templates are provided for students and students can also e-mail their completed work to their teachers. The use of technology in supporting students is excellent. The skills of teachers are also supported by the school’s well-developed technology infrastructure.

A number of LCVP students pursue the study of a modern language to Leaving Certificate level. For those students not pursuing a Leaving Certificate language, a language module is provided in French. One forty-minute period per week is provided for this module which is appropriate. The students follow the content and approach of the language module designed for the LCA. This is appropriate. The good planning for this module is noted. School management should explore the possibility of providing an \textit{ab initio} language module in a language other than French from time to time to provide students with the experience of learning a new language. The possibility of
providing certification in the form of Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) external assessment should also be examined.

1.3 Student selection and support

In relation to the selection of students for the programme, the principle of choice is respected. For this reason, the subject options for fifth year are designed in such a way as to allow as many students as possible to meet the criteria of the vocational subject groupings (VSGs). Those students who fulfill the requirements of the programme in terms of the appropriate combination of subjects within the VSGs are then encouraged to participate in the programme. The school has a total enrolment of 459 students, and currently, of the total senior cycle student cohort, about two thirds choose to participate in the programme. The somewhat higher ratio of male to female participation in LCVP is a consequence of the subject combinations within the VSGs.

Those students who opt to participate demonstrate commitment to programme completion. The induction process provides clarity to students in relation to programme content and approach. This means that learning can begin immediately and that student reflection is encouraged from the outset. The LCVP students are recognised as a discrete group within the school and great collegiality has reportedly been developed within LCVP class groups. Many LCVP events and activities are recognised as being particularly related to the programme.

The support provided to students is very good and there were numerous examples of this observed during the evaluation. The teaching of the Link Modules involves the use of a variety of teaching methodologies that endeavour to meet all students’ needs, including those requiring learning support. The use of group work, as observed, helps students to learn about themselves and to find their own strengths and it also supports students with special educational needs. The LCVP curriculum has been adapted to accommodate students with particular needs. For example, templates, used to facilitate optimum student work, have been developed, incorporating differentiated levels of challenge for students. In addition, there is careful monitoring of student completion of portfolio items and teachers have frequent meetings with students in relation to their portfolios. This careful monitoring results in a better quality end product, as evidenced in the attainment and achievement of merits by students. Teachers liaise with the school’s learning-support department in relation to individual student needs and difficulties. Students who receive special accommodations in the certificate examinations are also provided with the same accommodations in the in-school mock examinations.

1.4 Home-school links

Communication and provision of information about the LCVP to parents is thorough and systematic. Parents are fully briefed on senior cycle options for students and to this extent are involved in the process of programme selection. The student journal is regularly used as a means of communication between parents and teachers in relation to students and student application and progress. Parent-teacher meetings are also held in the usual manner to provide information to parents. The school operates a system whereby the student is present at the parent-teacher meeting which allows the student voice and perspective to be brought to reporting on student progress within the programme and also the student’s view of the programme as he or she participates. School reports are sent home after in-school assessments at Christmas and summer. There is an effective student filing system in place to record and monitor student progress.

As part of its DEIS plan, the school conducts destination tracking of former students, which obviously includes former LCVP students. The LCVP team has just devised a student evaluation
form which will be distributed to sixth year students prior to leaving school. This is a praiseworthy initiative.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND CO-ORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The creation of an LCVP core team and the provision of regular meeting time by school management demonstrate the way in which a team approach is promoted. Firstly, teamwork is proactively led by the principal, who is involved in the planning meetings for review of ongoing implementation of the programme. From examination of programme documentation and from interactions within the school, there was clear evidence that systematic planning is a feature of the LCVP team’s way of working together. The team meets four times a year and there is ongoing liaison between team members in relation to activities and delivery of the many aspects of the curriculum. The programme involves a busy calendar of events throughout the year and this requires weekly liaison with teachers, management, students, outside agencies and businesses on the part of the co-ordinator and the LCVP team.

The focus of planning for the implementation of the programme is appropriately student-centred. Records of planning meetings show that the emphasis is on monitoring of student progress, completion of portfolio items within specific timeframes, and achievement of specific learning outcomes (SLOs) in line with programme guidelines. The plan also contains records and analysis of student attainment and reflection on ways to ensure optimum attainment for each student. The weekly discussions of the LCVP team focus on the progress and needs of the individual students and means of facilitating student learning in different ways. This approach is praiseworthy.

The LCVP plan is well presented. The plan opens with the aims and objectives for the programme and links these with the mission statement of the school. The objectives outlined in programme documentation were observed in practice at the time of the evaluation. The plan also contains schemes of work for each year group and timeframes for the delivery of programme and course content. For example, the timing of the work experience is well thought-out and allows adequate time for preparation. The plan also includes a calendar of events and activities. Teachers adopt an integrated approach to planning. For example, while one teacher focuses on one aspect of the plan, another teacher consolidates planning for student learning from another perspective. This is commendable.

Review and evaluation form an integral part of planning. Commendably, parents and students are involved in review and evaluation. At the end of fifth year, students are asked to reflect on their own personal development within the programme and their own personal response to aspects of the programme. This is very good practice. The proposal to request sixth-year students to review and evaluate their own performance after the examination is being trialled this year. Destination tracking of former students is also undertaken. At the beginning of each school year, the school conducts an analysis of student attainment in certificate examinations in the LCVP and discusses the plan for the year in that context. The team follows up on individual aspects of the curriculum in order to bring about improvement or necessary change. For example, an improvement being introduced in the current year is that the employer will not only provide an oral account of the student’s work completion but also write an evaluation report on the student’s work experience.

2.2 Co-ordination
The work that past LCVP co-ordinators have undertaken over the years is recognised and acknowledged. A new co-ordinator has recently been appointed. In interaction with the inspector, the co-ordinator acknowledged the level of support received from the previous co-ordinator, from other teachers and from school management. The role of LCVP co-ordinator is linked to an assistant principal’s post of responsibility, for which there is a time allocation for the fulfillment of duties. However, the amount of time allocated for co-ordination varies from year to year. The time allocation from the post assists in the execution of the range of co-ordination activities and facilitates release of the co-ordinator for attendance at CPD.

The co-ordination of the LCVP involves engagement in an extensive number of activities. These include a range of administrational, educational and organisational duties: organising visits in and out; co-ordinating enterprise activities in conjunction with outside agencies; participation in competitions; ensuring LCVP team members are kept up-to-date on activities and events; liaising with the principal in relation to planned activities and funding; monitoring work-shadowing; scheduling LCVP team meetings; co-ordination of the LCVP plan; ensuring student portfolio work is ready for submission; and making arrangements for the Links Modules’ examination requirements. Examination of co-ordination records and planning documentation shows the efficiency and effectiveness with which the LCVP is co-ordinated.

Teamwork and co-operation are characteristics of the LCVP team. The co-ordinator has the business expertise which facilitates understanding of key aspects of the programme, as well as establishing links with businesses in the local area. Appropriate contacts are being fostered and maintained with outside agencies, support groups and employers. The guidance service is a very valuable resource for students in conducting their career investigation, in the organisation and delivery of mock interviews and in providing advice to students on career orientation. The ICT teacher ensures that students have the appropriate ICT skills. The constancy of the team has also contributed to continuity and development of the programme.

The LCVP co-ordinator liaises with schools encountered in LCVP cluster meetings on matters relating to the implementation of the programme. This is good practice. Networking with other schools and teachers has also helped to stimulate innovation and ideas.

2.3 Curriculum

The school’s implementation of the programme is in line with the philosophy of self-directed learning and promotion of enterprise. The students acquire entrepreneurial skills through their participation in the programme. Within the curriculum, the emphasis is on student initiative and teams working together to come up with ideas. Ideas for enterprise activities come from the students. The different enterprise activities which students engage in from year to year are evidence of the innovation and initiative displayed on the part of students. While the students receive guidance and are facilitated by the teachers, they are required to do the work and high expectations are set. This is good practice. The calendar of events throughout the year, the links forged and fostered with local businesses and participation in enterprise competitions enrich the experiences provided by the school for students.

Preparation for work is an excellent example of how different members of the teaching team contribute in an integrated way to the fulfilling of programme objectives. The provision of opportunities for work experience completed as part of the programme is exemplary and ensures very positive experiences for students. The very well designed booklet for work experience is a document developed collaboratively by the LCVP team to help students in organising themselves and preparing for work experience as well as reflecting on the experience itself. Students find their
own work placement and try to ensure that it provides an opportunity to explore a career investigation. The co-ordinator endeavours to ensure that the work placement is career-oriented for the particular student and that the experience dovetails with the preparation for work lesson content and the career investigation conducted. Portfolio items such as the curriculum vitae (CV), a diary of work experience and career investigation are items which students can improve upon by their participation in a well-chosen work placement. Students can also draw upon their experiences in answering in the examination and assessment context.

While the mandatory portfolio items have to be completed by all students, the optional portfolio items are decided upon based on the individual student needs and interests. This is good practice. Cross-curricular work is an important aspect of the LCVP and the commendable practice of different members of the teaching staff assisting with specific LCVP activities and events was very much in evidence. Many subject teachers and subject departments are involved in supporting students in the completion of assignments and portfolio items. Examples include, English in helping with report-writing, Mathematics in the analysis and use of statistics, PE in the organisation of enterprise activities and Business in the planning, costing, marketing and community development areas. In addition, the teachers of the VSGs, such as Engineering, Construction Studies and Home Economics, help students in creating cross-curricular links and in carrying out some elements of enterprise activities.

In the context of portfolio preparation, great emphasis is placed by the co-ordinator on the students identifying their own personal objectives as well as group objectives. In delivering the curriculum, the teachers focus on meeting the objectives laid down in the SLOs and this is commended.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING OF THE LINK MODULES

3.1 Planning and preparation

There was good short-term planning for the lessons observed. Worksheets had been prepared and were distributed to students which ensured efficient use of time and that students were focused on task completion. The delivery of the curriculum as observed was characterised by clarity of direction and purposeful learning. Clear learning objectives for individual lessons and for a series of lessons were shared with students. 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 quality of teaching was very good and was characterised by effective teacher presentation and purposeful work ethic on the part of students. Not only were lessons characterised by clarity of purpose, but there was also clarity in relation to how students should access and use websites efficiently and correctly. The lesson content for the lessons observed was appropriate and ensured that students engaged well. In one lesson observed, there was an appropriate focus on terminology and understanding of key terms and in another lesson, teachers gave students some practical advice and tips in relation to completing examination tasks and questions. The creation of a stimulating print-rich environment for students, where useful posters and charts with key elements of the course were displayed in teacher-based classrooms, is praised. The integration of ICT into the teaching and learning observed was also very good.

Active learning strategies were employed by teachers and students were required to work in small groups or in pairs, as well as in plenary with their teachers. The use of silent reading prior to
students working in pairs served as an effective preparatory strategy. Students worked well and sought clarifications from their teachers, when required. Teachers gathered responses from the students, using probing questions to elicit evidence from students and to draw students out. This type of questioning was effective. Teachers were affirming of student responses, augmenting and clarifying, where necessary. This was an appropriate approach.

The quality of learning was very good. In interaction with the inspector, students were confident and demonstrated sound knowledge of course content and concepts. There is consistently good attainment in certificate examinations. Preparation of examination strategies was observed during one lesson, as appropriate to the time of year. This served to both prepare and to motivate students.

3.3 Assessment

Teachers assess students in many different ways, including end-of-term tests, observation of class work and project work and monitoring of portfolio completion. Members of the LCVP team have been involved in the correction of Link Modules’ certificate examinations which provides invaluable insights into marking schemes and examination strategies. Students are informed orally and on their written work regarding their strengths and their areas for development. There was evidence of teachers building on student confidence and on student learning through the range of assessments and of experiences provided for students. The students’ experience of assessment within the programme is unique to the LCVP and has a motivating effect on student application. Teachers also use the outcomes of assessments to inform teaching practice and review plans of work. This is very good practice.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Senior management has deployed teachers to the LCVP teaching team that have a complementary set of skills and expertise to ensure the successful implementation of all aspects of the programme.
- The use of technology in supporting students is excellent. The skills of teachers are also supported by the school’s well-developed technology infrastructure.
- There was clear evidence that systematic planning is a feature of the LCVP team’s way of working together.
- Review and evaluation form an integral part of planning.
- The LCVP co-ordinator fulfills the range of administrational, educational and organisational duties with efficiency and effectiveness.
- The provision of opportunities for work experience completed as part of the programme is exemplary.
- The quality of teaching was very good and was characterised by effective teacher presentation, clarity of direction and purposeful work ethic on the part of students.
- The teaching of the Link Modules involves the use of a variety of teaching methodologies that endeavour to meet all students’ needs, including those requiring learning support.
- The quality of learning was very good and there is consistently good attainment in certificate examinations.

As a means of building on these strengths the following key recommendations are made:
• It is recommended that senior management ensure that LCVP students have equality of access to PE on the senior cycle curriculum.
• It is recommended that school management explore the possibility of providing an ab-initio language module in a language other than French from time to time to provide students with the experience of learning a new language.

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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

Fair and well written 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 school will explore the possibility of providing an ab-notio language module in a language other than French from time to time.

- LCVP students will have equality of access to P.E. on the Senior Cycle curriculum.