EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE VOCATIONAL PROGRAMME (LCVP)

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) in St. Fergal’s College, Rathdowney, Co. Laois. It presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for the further development of the programme in the school. During the evaluation, the inspectors 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 inspectors liaised extensively with the programme coordinator and visited classrooms to observe teaching and learning. The inspectors provided oral feedback to teachers on lessons observed. The inspectors 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-ordinator and the core team following the evaluation. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The LCVP was introduced into St Fergal’s College in 2004. A number of cohorts of students have now completed the programme and have achieved well in the certificate examinations. The LCVP is now firmly established in the college. A majority of students in senior cycle opt to undertake the LCVP and, consequently, classes are mainly organised to reflect the composition of mainstream class groups. All students who are qualified to participate in the LCVP do so.

The LCVP is ably managed and implemented by a core team comprising two business teachers, the school’s guidance counsellor and a physical education teacher who also co-ordinates the programme. All members of the core team takes link module classes. A teacher of modern languages also contributes to the running of the programme. Continuing professional development (CPD) has been well-supported by senior management and availed of by the core team. A very good relationship exists amongst the members of the core team, which is characterised by mutual support and collaboration. The appropriation of a wide range of teacher expertise to support the programme is positive. The possibility of including an additional teacher on the core team might be usefully considered in the future. Such an arrangement would increase available expertise, while also strengthening the team’s ability to accommodate change.

Generally, teachers are aware of the LCVP and vocational subject groupings (VSG). Teachers have been involved, on an informal basis, in supporting LCVP students in their classrooms and in particular tasks. This is positive. However, there remains considerable scope for greater planned execution of the LCVP as an integrated cross-curricular programme. It is recommended that the LCVP team works towards heightening the awareness, at whole-school level, of the nature of the LCVP as an integrated programme through, for example, the use of LCVP-specific notice boards in the staffroom, announcing upcoming LCVP events, and creating opportunities to brief teaching staff regarding the aims and objectives of the LCVP and the centrality of cross-curricular work to the success of students participating in the programme. This will assist the LCVP team in
exploring and documenting, with all subject teachers, the links between their subjects and the link modules curriculum. Planning for the programme could then be extended to include concrete steps to implement the identified cross-curricular links and subject teachers can be encouraged to highlight these elements of their subjects with students at appropriate stages during the year.

1.2 Resources

School management is very supportive and has a good knowledge of the LCVP and has ensured that appropriate staffing and timetabling arrangements are in place to enable the running of a successful programme. Fifth-year students and sixth-year students are provided with two lessons per week for link module classes and with one lesson for Guidance each week. Additional staffing for the LCVP is used by senior management to support the modern language module, as well as some of the subjects which are necessary for students to participate in the programme.

Guidance is provided as an element of the LCVP curriculum. Guidance lessons include the preparation by students of a curriculum vitae and preparation for work experience. In addition, the career investigation is supported in fifth year. Focused guidance support is thus provided for students participating in the LCVP. It is very positive that formal, timetabled involvement of the guidance department is in place with clear links to the programme.

Link module lessons are held in the school’s information and communication technology (ICT) rooms. This has the advantage of facilitating students with good access to ICT and the internet as required. As a further extension of this good work, and given the regularity with which LCVP students use the ICT rooms, it is recommended that the core team should give further consideration to the development of the learning environment in these rooms. This will provide opportunities to reinforce student learning and, potentially, enhance their awareness of key concepts and learning goals relevant to the programme.

Funding for the LCVP is provided by senior management as required, at the request of the co-ordinator and in consultation with the core team. There is a small contribution sought from students toward the cost of some activities, while the school supports all other costs.

1.3 Student selection and support

Students and parents are given timely and accurate information regarding the LCVP. A parents’ information evening is organised for parents of third-year and Transition Year (TY) students. In addition, the principal and the co-ordinator address third-year students regarding the LCVP. Following students’ choice of subjects, all students who meet the requirements of the programme participate in the LCVP. Currently, students who do not qualify for the programme attend link module lessons in fifth year where they participate fully. It is suggested that this arrangement should be continued into sixth year where the possibility of self-certification on the part of the school for these students could be investigated. This would ensure that all students receive the required amount of instruction time each week as set out in circular 29/95.

Learning support is provided for students on the basis of need and is student specific rather than LCVP specific. Additional support in the preparation of portfolios is provided for students with additional educational needs.

A good level of awareness of the LCVP among students, prior to their entry to the programme, was evident during the evaluation and they were very aware of the potential benefits to themselves
of successful completion of the programme. In some cases it was clear that ensuring eligibility for the LCVP was a factor in students’ choice of subjects.

1.4 Home-school links

Parent-teacher meetings are used in the usual manner to inform parents of students’ progress and additional contact with students’ homes is as regular and frequent as circumstances demand. Students are provided with regular and useful feedback from their teachers regarding their progress.

The LCVP team in St Fergal’s College has developed valuable links with a number of businesses in the local community. These businesses are of great assistance to the school in providing work experience placements for students and in providing expertise and support. These links are also used to source guest speakers and for site visits. However, the range and scope of visits by students to out-of-school sites, and of guest speakers who address students on enterprise-related topics in class, is limited. In order to provide better balance and breadth to the programme of activities, it is recommended that the school expand its links with outside community and voluntary enterprises, education providers and businesses. A wider variety of such links will also help students by providing a selection of possibilities which are more directly relevant to the subjects they are studying as part of the overall programme.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND CO ORDINATION

2.1 Planning

A good, thorough written plan has been prepared by the members of the LCVP team, following the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) format. The plan lists the aims and objectives of the programme and contains information on the management of the programme in the school. An outline of the link modules course content to be delivered in each of the two years of the programme is also included. Teachers have compiled an extensive bank of resources and assessment materials to enhance the delivery of the course content and assessment of students’ progress. In addition, reference is made in planning documents to the vocational subject groupings. More detailed schedules for course delivery were also available in some individual teachers’ planning notes. It is recommended that all the link modules teachers use these schedules in order to co-ordinate the progress of the three class groups in each year. In a similar manner, the schedule for the delivery of LCVP-relevant career guidance topics should be made available to the full LCVP team.

The LCVP team demonstrated a high level of collegiality and co-operation in the day-to-day management and implementation of the programme. Informal meetings are held as necessary to manage ongoing arrangements for the various activities that are in train at any particular time. It is recommended that formal meetings of the team, which were formerly held weekly, are held at least on a termly basis in order to facilitate long-term planning. It is positively noted by the inspectors that there is good evidence that issues of a pedagogical nature are discussed at meetings. In addition, there is evidence that reflection and review form part of the ongoing interaction between LCVP team members and with management and that the outcomes of such activities feed back into the planning process, to the ultimate benefit of students. In order to enhance the review process, it is recommended that clear and objective success criteria and specific procedures be developed and that the views of all relevant parties, including parents and students, should be sought and included.
2.2 Coordination

The LCVP co-ordinator, who holds the post of programme co-ordinator under the terms of circular ppt17/02 and who also has responsibility for the school’s TY programme, has been co-ordinating the LCVP for seven years and has developed a good level of expertise. The quality of programme co-ordination is good and the programme is very well structured and organized. There is good communication between the LCVP team and senior in-school management.

Co-ordinating the LCVP involves carrying out a range of duties and activities including promoting the programme amongst both parents and students, organising relevant LCVP-focussed input for parents’ information evenings, communicating with management, staff, parents and external bodies, assisting the Guidance counsellor in organising work placements, keeping records and delivering elements of the programme in class. These duties are carried out effectively and the co-ordinator works hard to ensure the ongoing successful implementation of the programme. Appropriate resources and facilities, including ICT, are available to assist the co-ordinator in carrying out these duties and an appropriate time allocation has been provided to the co-ordinator to carry out relevant duties.

2.3 Curriculum

Students undergo a short induction process at the beginning of fifth year following which a programme of activities and learning opportunities is provided. In addition to offering students opportunities for teamwork and hands-on experience, these activities are the basis of the various reports and documents for the students’ portfolios. Theory and practice are well integrated in the manner in which the course content is taught and, in carrying out activities leading to the preparation of the portfolio items, students also cover much of the theoretical content of the course.

All core portfolio items are prepared by students and, of the optional items, an enterprise report and a work experience diary are submitted. Portfolio items are prepared in school under the supervision of the co-ordinator and the link modules teachers. Completed portfolio items are stored in the school.

In carrying out enterprise activities, small teams of students are set up and a suitable enterprise activity is assigned to each team. Following a short period of preparation, the teams are then released to carry out their activity, reporting to the teacher only when the activity is complete or if difficulties are encountered in the process which require assistance to overcome. The manner in which autonomy for managing and completing these activities is delegated entirely to students is an excellent example, in itself, of promoting enterprise amongst the students and of encouraging self-directed learning and the LCVP team are commended for this approach. Examples of the enterprise activities carried out by students include running a table quiz, a talent show and a first-year concert.

All students engage in a three or five-day period of work experience as part of their studies while in fifth year. This usually takes place during the February mid term or the Easter holiday period. Students are well prepared in advance by the guidance counsellor. They are facilitated to find their own work placements, with assistance from the school if necessary, based on their VSGs and career choices where possible. Contact is made with employers in advance of the work placement and the good practice of employers providing a report on students’ performance is carried out. In order to provide support for both students and employers and to ensure the successful running of placements, it is recommended that, in so far as is possible, all workplaces are visited by school
staff or that, at a minimum, telephone contact is made with employers during the placement period. It is also recommended that consideration be given to carrying out work experience during term time, perhaps while sixth-year students are sitting mock examinations, to facilitate better communication with employers.

Arrangements for the provision of a language module are in place for those students who are not taking a modern European language, other than Irish and English, in the Leaving Certificate. These students attend one lesson per week, for a ten-week period of fifth year, in French or German. This module should be extended to one period per week, or equivalent, for the full two years of the programme, in accordance with the terms of circular 13/2009 and it is suggested that participation of students be recognized, through the award of a certificate of completion, following successful completion of the module.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Section 2.1 of this report refers to long-term planning for implementing the LCVP in the school. The class work carried out in the lessons visited reflected the objectives of the programme and was in keeping with planning documents. There was evidence of good short-term planning. Teachers were fully familiar with lesson content and their methodologies provided for differentiated approaches to teaching and learning in accordance with the range of students’ abilities, needs and interests. Appropriate resource material had been prepared in advance. Teachers’ planning and preparation for lessons resulted in quality learning opportunities for students.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Good quality teaching was evident in all the lessons observed. Lesson content included an analysis of a case study from a past examination paper, types of work, qualities and skills of entrepreneurs and recruitment. Lessons were well paced and, in most instances, there was an appropriate balance between teacher-led and student-centred phases. A disciplined and focused atmosphere that supported an effective learning environment was apparent at all times and good progress was made in all lessons.

The teachers taught with enthusiasm and generated an atmosphere that was inclusive, caring and challenging. Teachers’ approach to their work was professional; they had high expectations of their students and they supported them very well to meet these expectations. Teachers displayed good classroom management skills. They moved around the classrooms monitoring and supporting students as necessary, and encouraging them to perform to the best of their abilities. This level of individual attention facilitated a differentiated approach to teaching. Students’ behaviour was good; they engaged well with lessons and worked hard to meet the challenges posed by teachers. There was clear evidence of good quality learning in almost all instances.

Lesson structure was mostly good and there was a logical progression to the development of the lesson in all cases. However, it is recommended that lesson structure be enhanced by the sharing of lesson objectives with students at the outset of each lesson. This will give students a context for the lesson and as well as giving a sense of purpose and direction to classroom work. It can encourage a degree of self-assessment by students within the class and help individual students to monitor their own progress. Such lesson objectives will also provide teachers with a basis for reviewing progress at the close of lessons and for assigning homework.
A variety of classroom methodologies, appropriate to the LCVP, was observed in use. These methodologies included questioning of students, discussion, student writing and note taking, the use of ICT, and the provision to students of good quality handouts and work sheets. Both individual and group tasks were assigned as appropriate.

Questioning of students was used effectively in most instances to review previous work and to assess levels of knowledge and understanding. In some classrooms, the commendable practice of recording students’ responses on the board was evident, giving them ownership of the material being developed. Students generally responded knowledgably and with confidence. Questions ranged from simple lower-order, recall-type questions to more difficult higher-order questions which challenged students and encouraged them to think at a deeper level.

In most classrooms visited, students’ input was sought and valued by teachers. However, in a few instances, greater use could have been made of brainstorming to encourage students to explore a topic and share their own experiences and knowledge with fellow students. Points raised by students could, in such instances, be recorded on the board and used as the basis of a subsequent teacher-led fuller examination of the topic.

Teachers circulated throughout the classrooms and supported individuals and groups of students as the need arose. Continuity from previous lessons was good and new information was well linked to prior learning. While there was generally good use of subject-specific terminology by teachers, it is recommended that students are encouraged to compile a dictionary of key words over time, to enhance their fluency with new words and terms.

Homework given was appropriate to the lesson content, and was designed to reinforce the lesson and to consolidate learning.

3.3 Assessment

Formative assessment of students is carried out on a continuous basis by questioning in class, through correction of homework and portfolio work, and through the excellent level of teacher movement and observation of students during class that was noted by the inspector. When a draft of a portfolio item is presented, it is corrected and returned to the student for follow up. This process is repeated until a final agreed version is reached. In this manner, portfolio preparation is carried out under the direct supervision of teachers. It is recommended that students are provided with a copy of the portfolio marking scheme, at an early date, to guide them and encourage self assessment in their preparation of portfolio items.

It is commendable that students are provided with copies of the specific learning outcomes of the link modules. This informing and motivating approach gives them an opportunity to monitor their own progress in addition to giving a sense of purpose and direction to classroom work.

A good system of formal assessment of and reporting on students’ progress is in place in St. Fergal’s College. Assessment of fifth-year students’ progress at Christmas and summer is by means of common written examinations. Sixth-year students sit a mock examination in the early spring. Progress reports are sent to students’ homes following these assessments and, in addition, contact is made with sixth-year students’ homes regarding progress with their portfolio work in January and February of their Leaving Certificate year. Additional testing is at the discretion of individual teachers.
As a means of encouraging and facilitating students to carry out revision for their examinations, they are encouraged to compile a folder of LCVP notes and resources over time. They are also provided with a very good set of revision notes covering all aspects of their course. In addition, past examination questions are used as a basis for both class work and homework. Outcomes for students in the Leaving Certificate examination have been very encouraging in recent years. In order to build on this success, it is recommended that the current, somewhat informal review of these results, annually, be formalised and that trends be analysed and used to set targets for future years.

Students, during interviews with the inspectors, demonstrated a high level of awareness of the benefits of following the LCVP, including the development of transferable skills such as communication, teamwork and organisational skills; an increased awareness of world of work and greater insight into specific careers; and the possibility of gaining additional CAO points.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The LCVP is an important element of curricular provision in St Fergal’s College.
- The LCVP is ably managed by the core team and the programme co-ordinator.
- There is good timetabled provision for link module lessons and for the integration of Guidance in the programme.
- ICT provision is very good and very accessible to students.
- Good, timely, relevant information is provided to students and parents regarding programme and subject choices.
- A good written programme plan has been developed.
- Lessons were well prepared and well structured.
- There was clear evidence of student learning in lessons.
- Overall classroom management was good.
- Teachers have high expectations of students.
- Methodologies were mostly appropriate, with a good balance between teacher-centred and student-centred phases in lessons.

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

- It is recommended that the LCVP team works towards furthering the awareness, at whole-school level, of the nature of the LCVP as an integrated programme.
- It is recommended that timetabled provision for the modern language module be adjusted to comply with course requirements.
- In order to provide better balance and breadth to the programme of activities, it is recommended that the school expand its links with outside community and voluntary enterprises, education providers and businesses.
- It is recommended that formal meetings of the team are held at least on a termly basis in order to facilitate long-term planning.
- It is recommended that students should be provided with copies of the portfolio marking scheme at an early date in their participation in the programme.
- It is recommended that a review of some aspects of the current arrangements for students’ work experience be undertaken.

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