EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) in Athboy Community School. It presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for the further development of the programme in the school. During the evaluation, the inspector held meetings with the school principal, a core team of teachers and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector liaised with the programme coordinator 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 coordinator at the end of the evaluation period. 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.

Athboy Community School was formed by the amalgamation of St James’ Vocational School and St Joseph’s Secondary School in 2004. The school is currently split between two campuses. The former St Joseph’s Secondary School is used for teaching the majority of subjects with a small number of practical subjects such as Science, Engineering and Construction Studies held on the former S. James’ Vocational School campus. The school currently has an application with the Department of Education and Skills requesting a new school building.

The LCA was introduced to Athboy Community School in 2005. The other senior cycle options available are the Transition Year (TY) programme, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the established Leaving Certificate. Seventeen teachers are involved in the teaching of LCA. At the time of the evaluation, there were fifteen students in year one of the programme (LCA 1) and fourteen students in year two (LCA 2).

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The LCA programme is well supported in the school. The co-ordinator of LCA was appointed in 2007 under the terms of Circular Letter PPT 18/02. It was reported that regular informal meetings allow the programme co-ordinator to maintain good communication with senior management, teachers, students and parents. The LCA teaching team meets approximately three times per year, once at the beginning of the year and again on the occasions when credits are being awarded. Minutes were available for these meetings.

The members of the LCA teaching team who met with the inspector during the evaluation displayed interest and dedication to the programme. New teachers to the school are mentored by a more experienced teacher who holds a post of responsibility for the position. Induction for teachers new to LCA is provided by the LCA co-ordinator and these teachers are also guided by an experienced teacher in the relevant subject area. It is recommended that, at the LCA meeting at the start of the school year, the programme co-ordinator should provide an input on the underlying principles of LCA and provide opportunities to discuss teaching and learning methodologies appropriate to LCA. Teachers of LCA are encouraged and facilitated to avail of appropriate continuing professional development (CPD) offered by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS).
Commendably, LCA students are represented in school systems such as the school’s prefect system and the student council. There is an annual awards ceremony for all senior cycle students and it is noteworthy that awards are made on an alphabetical, rather than a programme, basis. There is also an additional award for LCA Student of the Year.

1.2 Resources

The principal has a good knowledge of the LCA programme and the issues around its implementation. All students who have expressed an interest in LCA are interviewed by the principal and the LCA co-ordinator. The school’s LCA admission policy stipulates that a parent or guardian must accompany the student to this meeting. It is good practice that the timetabling of LCA and the choice of modules and electives are discussed with the LCA co-ordinator on an annual basis and changes are made depending on students’ interest and career aspirations. There is scope to broaden this discussion to include staff and students.

The LCA co-ordinator has a solid awareness and understanding of the programme and its execution. It is good practice that the selection of teachers for the LCA programme is based on teachers’ interests and subject expertise. For example, Agriculture Horticulture has recently been added to the current LCA 1 timetable. It is noteworthy that the LCA programme has been reviewed in the last year. As a result of this programme review, double class periods have been timetabled on the former vocational school campus in order to allow for travel time.

Information and communications technology (ICT) is used effectively in organising and delivering the programme. Many classrooms are broadband enabled. An ePortal system has also been established recently in the school. Management reported that this system is effective as a means of recording attendance and assessment as well as for communication with teachers. Students have access to the ICT room for ICT modules and additional access to the room is organised through a booking system in the staffroom.

1.3 Student selection and support

Students and their parents are provided with a range of information and supports before they choose the LCA programme. The guidance counsellor meets with third-year students on an individual basis to assist them in their decision-making for senior cycle. The LCA co-ordinator visits all third-year classes to provide them with information on the programme. All parents are invited to attend the senior cycle options night and are provided with a brochure on LCA which has been developed by the LCA co-ordinator. A previous student of LCA also assists in this presentation. All potential LCA students complete an application form. They are then interviewed by a selection panel comprising any three of the principal, deputy principal, LCA co-ordinator or one other teacher. Students are notified of their place on the programme at the end of May. The co-ordinator collaborates with the learning-support department and teachers of third-year students in order to ensure that each student is appropriately placed.

When LCA students need extra support in literacy and numeracy, they are withdrawn from lessons and provided with one-to-one or small group support. At the start of the school year, the dissemination of information on specific learning difficulties such as mild general learning disability, dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) would be helpful to teachers of LCA. It is good to note that the co-ordinator compiles a list of key words which are pertinent to LCA and these are conveyed to the special educational needs department.
At the beginning of the first term, the LCA co-ordinator holds a half-day induction seminar with LCA 1 students. This involves workshops, getting to know each other, icebreaker exercises and the establishment of a code of conduct.

1.4 Home-school links

Appropriate links are maintained with the home through a range of methods; parent-teacher meetings, open nights, phone calls, written feedback in students’ diaries, letters home and the school newsletter. It is very positive that the school has developed a rewards and incentives strategy to promote attendance and parents are invited to attend the awards ceremony.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The LCA teaching team meets formally at the beginning and end of the school year. Additional meetings are held as necessary. The LCA core planning team meets approximately once per term. There is also regular informal communication on an ongoing basis. Comprehensive programmes of work have been developed for all subject areas within LCA. Best practice was observed where these contained learning outcomes for the topics to be taught, linked to appropriate methodologies and methods of assessment within an appropriate timeframe. It is recommended that this good practice be extended to all schemes of work. When reviewing the schemes of work it is recommended that learning outcomes be included. There is also scope to include the learning support department in this process. In keeping with the collaborative work ethic of the LCA team, these plans could then be added to the school’s ePortal system.

2.2 Co-ordination

Co-ordination of the programme is carried out effectively. The duties of the co-ordinator include liaising with the State Examinations Commission, liaising with the teachers of LCA, students, senior management and the special educational needs department as well as programme planning and development.

Good communication is maintained among the LCA teaching staff through a notice board in the staffroom, information slots at staff meetings and an LCA calendar in the main office to highlight key dates. Communication with management occurs on a regular basis both formally and informally. The fact that the co-ordinator teaches both the LCA 1 and LCA 2 groups is beneficial as the subject-specific, daily contact with the students facilitates the development of positive relationships.

2.3 Curriculum

The LCA curriculum provided is broad and balanced. A good range of vocational specialisms and elective modules are available to students. The vocational specialisms provided are ICT and Graphics and Construction Studies in LCA 1 and Agriculture Horticulture and ICT in LCA 2. Agriculture Horticulture has most recently been added to the vocational specialisms available as a result of student interest and teacher availability. The elective modules studied by students in LCA 2 are Engineering, Hotel Catering and Tourism, Art and Graphics and Construction Studies. LCA1 students are currently studying electives in Art and Leisure and Recreation. A further two electives will be decided upon at the end of the year, depending on students’ interests.
Timetabling is generally appropriate. However, the allocation of double class periods for Social Education could be reviewed, as single periods would be more appropriate. There is scope, when planning the timetable for next year, to include a class period for personal reflection as it helps develop the social and personal skills of each student from the outset and facilitates the development of reflective practice.

The modern language studied by all LCA students in year 2 is German. LCA 1 students study Irish. At the time of the evaluation, a number of students had recently been granted an exemption from Irish and these students were sitting at the back of the Gaeilge Chumarsáideach class, doing work in another subject area. However, during the evaluation, it was noted that the students were unable to complete these tasks as the worksheets provided were unclear. This arrangement is unsatisfactory. Discussions with management at the time of the evaluation indicated that plans were in place for students who are exempted from Irish to attend extra tuition in English or Mathematics in future. These plans should be progressed in order to ensure that students maximise the learning potential of their time in class.

Work experience is an integral part of the LCA curriculum. Students are encouraged to set up their own work experience where possible. The school also retains a bank of potential employers should students experience difficulty in attaining a suitable placement themselves. There is a good level of interaction with employers both prior to and after a student’s placement and students also keep a diary of their work experience.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Teachers employed good short term planning and a broad range of teacher-generated resources was observed in many subject areas. These included worksheets, word banks and word searches. Where employed, ICT was used effectively in the preparation of teaching and learning materials. As the ePportal system develops in the school, the LCA folder on the ePortal system could include programmes of work for each subject area. Resources, particularly those applicable to the cross curricular integration that is an essential component of the LCA programme, could also be available on the ePortal system.

3.2 Learning and teaching

There was a well-structured approach to learning and teaching in many classes visited in Athboy Community School. The majority of teachers explained the learning outcomes of the lesson to students at the outset. Best practice was observed where the teacher returned to the learning outcomes during the lesson in order to focus on the content and used them in the summary at the end of the lesson. It is recommended that all teachers clearly outline the learning outcomes to the class at the outset and use them to pace and to structure the lesson from start to finish.

Teachers used a wide range of active learning methodologies including class discussion, writing, practical work, brainstorming, group work, paired work, oral work including spelling, reading aloud and the pronunciation of subject-specific terminology. Where methodologies were varied throughout the lessons, they served to engage students’ interest and keep them focused. Resources used included the data projector, worksheets, textbooks, newspaper clippings, whiteboard, CD
player and student-generated posters. These were used effectively as visual aids to support the content of the lessons.

In practical subjects, students worked with good regard for health and safety regulations. They displayed good routines for setting up and tidying away equipment and materials. Students co-operated in groups and demonstrated their ability to work collaboratively. Special-needs assistants worked with students in many of the lessons visited and all interaction was carried out in an unobtrusive manner.

Particular attention was given to the development of literacy in all lessons. Teachers encouraged the use of subject-specific terminology in both oral and written work. New terminology was noted on the whiteboard and students were encouraged to spell, pronounce words and read aloud. At the next planning meeting, these strategies should be noted, incorporated into the planning documentation and used in the development of the school’s literacy policy.

Students were regularly affirmed and encouraged for their efforts and contributions. Lessons were purposeful and students were challenged by the content. Commendably, in all lessons, teachers circled the room and provided support and encouragement to students as they performed practical or written activities. It was observed that students were confident and capable as they worked on their assigned activities. It is noteworthy that teachers went to great lengths to ensure that lesson content had practical applications. Appropriate links were established, where applicable, with students’ prior learning and everyday experiences.

A number of teachers differentiated the lesson content effectively to make it accessible to all the students in the class. In many instances, questioning was well used to gauge students’ level of understanding, to probe their responses and to reinforce recently learnt subject matter in the lessons. Students responded well to questions and did not hesitate to ask questions themselves. It is suggested that approaches to differentiation be discussed and further developed at future planning meetings.

Most students were co-operative in class. Overall, discipline was effectively and sensitively maintained and a good teacher-student and student-student rapport contributed to this. Some effective classroom management strategies were utilised to engage and motivate students. In most lessons, students were encouraged to listen to each other and to their teacher; answering out of turn and chorus answering were discouraged immediately in a sensitive manner. However, this was not the case in every class visited. In one class, the planning and delivery of the lesson did not encourage the full engagement of the group. Students did not listen to each other or to the teacher and some students used inappropriate and, on occasions, offensive language. It is strongly recommended that attention be given to the planning of lessons and to proven classroom management strategies in order to engage all students in the learning process. It is particularly important that students listen to each other’s answers in a courteous way and that steps be taken to prohibit the use of inappropriate language.

There is a need for the school’s senior management to facilitate and encourage the sharing of the good practices observed around classroom management and mixed ability teaching. These are also areas where further CPD would be valuable.

3.3 Assessment

A range of tasks, key assignments and student notebooks was observed during the evaluation. These were tidy, well organised and of an appropriate standard. Further assessment modes are
regularly used and these include questioning, observation, practical exercises and written assignments. Students’ progress is monitored through the completion of the key assignments and tasks related to individual modules in the programme. It is recommended that, in addition to correcting and checking students’ work, teachers should provide students with constructive feedback on their work.

Feedback is provided to parents at annual parent-teacher meetings and in school reports which are sent out twice during the school year. There is also scope to include Christmas and summer assessments for LCA students, in line with the other senior cycle assessments in the school.

It is noteworthy that the school reviews the LCA programme on an annual basis. To date, this has included feedback questionnaires from teachers and students as well as a full discussion of the programme at the LCA team meeting at the end of the school year. This feedback has been used to outline the strengths and weaknesses within the programme and amendments have been made as a result. It is recommended that the review of the programme be extended to include input from the parents of final-year students. The school might find it useful to access the review documents available on the website of the Second Level Support Service (www.slss.ie/lca).

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The LCA programme is well supported in the school.
- Co-ordination of the programme is carried out effectively.
- Information and communications technology (ICT) is used effectively in organising and delivering the programme.
- Appropriate links are maintained with the home through parent-teacher meetings, open nights, phone calls, letters, written feedback in students’ diaries, and the school newsletter.
- Effective classroom management strategies are utilised to engage and motivate students.
- Teachers encouraged the use of subject-specific terminology in both oral and written work.
- In most lessons observed, students were confident and capable as they worked on the activities set.
- A range of assessment modes is regularly used; these include questioning, observation, practical exercises and written assignments.

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

- At the LCA meeting at the start of the school year, the programme coordinator should familiarise all teachers with the underlying principles of LCA and discuss teaching and learning methodologies which would be appropriate for the entire LCA team.
- All teachers should clearly outline the learning outcomes to the class at the outset and use them to pace and to structure the lesson from start to finish.
- Management should facilitate and encourage the sharing of good practices around classroom management and mixed ability teaching, a range of which were observed in a number of lessons during the evaluation.
- In addition to correcting and checking students’ work, teachers should provide students with constructive feedback on their work.

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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 Report which recognises the effective way in which the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme is supported and implemented in the school through the involvement of all the partners. It affirms the staff in the use of management strategies and teaching methodologies.

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 Programme Co-ordinator has familiarised all teachers with the underlying principles of LCA as well as briefing them on appropriate teaching and learning methodologies – including formative assessment. Management has suggested ways in which teachers could collaborate and share good practice within all subject departments – including LCA. This includes facilitating an Assessment for Learning course for an initial group of teachers.