An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Applied Programme

REPORT

Scoil Carmel, O’Connell Avenue
Limerick
Roll Number: 64300V

Date of inspection: 7 October 2009
EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCA) in Scoil Carmel. 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 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 deputy principal, the programme coordinator and the core team 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; a response was not received from the board.

Scoil Carmel is a Catholic secondary school for girls under the patronage of Catholic Education – An Irish Schools Trust (CEIST).

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The senior management team in Scoil Carmel has a detailed knowledge of the LCA programme, its structure, aims and implementation, together with a deep understanding of its place in providing for the particular needs and interests of students in the school. The principal provides leadership and support for the effective implementation of the programme and appropriately delegates leadership to the coordinators and the core team to facilitate the success of the programme. There is a high level of collaboration and ongoing regular communication between senior management and the LCA team in relation to the implementation of the programme.

LCA is a prominent part of the educational provision of the school. The programme is publicised and implemented on a whole-school basis and the level of staff experience of teaching the programme is high. The programme is a fully-integrated part of structure of the school. LCA-related items form part of each staff meeting at which arrangements, such as those relating to the completion of student tasks, are also dealt with. This integration helps to provide very well for successful implementation. The programme has a very positive profile among the whole staff who are fully aware of its place in the school’s curriculum and are supportive of it.

Staff and student knowledge and awareness of the implementation of the programme in the school are further supported, in line with good practice, by means of two dedicated LCA noticeboards, one in the staffroom and another in the staff corridor. In keeping with the whole-school approach, teachers new to the programme are supported and mentored by the programme co-ordinator and the experienced programme team. To ensure continuing benefit from this process of induction, it should be formalised by inclusion in the LCA plan. All teachers of the programme are encouraged and facilitated to engage in the continuing professional development (CPD) provided for the
programme through the support service and their involvement is recorded in the LCA plan. All teachers new to the programme attend CPD. This is good practice.

Elements of planning for teaching the programme are often integrated into subject department planning, as in the case of planning for the rotation of teachers taking responsibility for students’ tasks which is undertaken at subject-department level. Such support within the subject departments is valuable in the achievement of the aims of the programme in the school.

1.2 Resources

Good practice is followed in the assignment of teachers to the programme. From the initial introduction of LCA to the school, teachers have been assigned to it, following consultation, on the basis of their interest and commitment to its aims and objectives. The commitment of teachers to the programme remains undiminished.

Work experience is organised and administered in a systematic manner and the involvement of the whole LCA team in achieving its success is commended. Three blocks of work experience are provided for students over the four sessions. These are co-ordinated by the teacher of Vocational Preparation and Guidance (VPG) who contacts the employers in advance. The students often arrange their own placements and are well prepared for these placements in the course of VPG classes. Each student is visited by a teacher in the workplace in the second week of work experience. The rota for visitation is prepared by the VPG teacher and is displayed on the staffroom noticeboard.

The approach to meeting the additional learning needs of the students in the LCA programme is appropriate. To further enhance reflective collaboration with regard to provision for additional educational needs, it is suggested that the practicality of involving the SEN coordinator in the programme core team should be examined.

The teaching time allocated to the various courses is in line with requirements while the scheduling and completion of course modules meet the requirements of the programme. The arrangement of teaching time in single and double period lessons and their distribution across the week is in line with good practice. The timetables in place for the programme provide appropriate teaching time for the students of LCA as detailed in Circular Letter M29/95 of the Department of Education and Skills.

Students have good access to the computer room. The school is examining means of improving the information and communications technology (ICT) facilities available for the programme, including the provision of broadband internet access more widely within classrooms. The possibility of using a small number of computers, perhaps laptop computers, within classrooms other than the computer room should be explored. There is appropriate access to ICT facilities for the co-ordinators and teachers to support them in programme planning and ICT is used for the generation of planning documentation and other programme materials. Resources from the website of the support service are being used for programme planning and organisation, including some of the content of the LCA students’ journals and the report handbook. This sourcing and use of available resources is good practice.
1.3 Student selection and support

Students are identified and selected for inclusion in the programme in accordance with a clear set of criteria which are in line with the overall aims and purpose of LCA. These students are selected on an individual basis. Comprehensive guidance is provided for students with regard to the programme, particularly in third year when the guidance counsellor arranges to meet the classes, expressly to present information on LCA, TY and the established Leaving Certificate. The programme co-ordinator also presents relevant information to all third-year students and students in TY. Students are advised appropriately of the advantages and benefits of the programme.

A guidance counsellor is timetabled for one class period per week with the LCA 1 class to teach the Guidance module of the VPG course while the entire VPG course in LCA 2 is taught by a guidance counsellor. This good practice meets the requirements of the programme regarding timetabled guidance provision.

There are close links between the learning support department and the LCA teaching team. Collaboration is further enhanced by the practice of team teaching, involving the learning support department, in the teaching of the modules Hair and Beauty and Vocational Preparation and Guidance. It is commendable that team teaching is arranged for students in LCA. The arrangement, however, depends on the timetable. It is suggested that provision for team teaching could be further enhanced by arranging for learning support to be provided in specific LCA lessons when the timetable is being designed. This should also apply when planning for the provision of resource teaching and for teaching English as an Additional Language (EAL). Appropriate provision is made for a small number of students studying English as an additional language, principally during the time allocated to Gaeilge Chumarsáideach, where the student is exempted from the study of Gaeilge.

Good practice is followed regarding the planning and implementation of the induction of students to the programme. The induction pack used provides for consistency and thoroughness. To further enhance the importance accorded the induction of students, it is recommended that a detailed description of the procedure followed be included in the LCA plan. At the time of the evaluation, the school was about to embark on the full implementation of a mentoring programme for first-year students. A number of students of the LCA programme were among the group of twenty senior-cycle students being prepared for involvement as mentors in this student-care programme. This is a further indication of the integration of LCA students in the life of the school in line with good practice.

1.4 Home-school links

Awareness of the LCA programme, its structure and aims is actively encouraged among parents and the wider community. The programme in the school has a prominent and positive profile. LCA features in the school prospectus and it is presented at the open night for parents in advance of first year. Information on the programme is presented to parents in preparation for students making their programme choices for senior cycle. Reference to the programme is also included on the school’s web site. Links with employers and the wider community are fostered by contacts made by the whole LCA team in relation to work experience.

Parents are invited to attend programme events and to take part in the planning of the programme in such areas as the selection of vocational specialisms and elective modules. However, some difficulty is reported by the school with regard to achieving full involvement by parents in these
areas. Parents do however attend LCA parent-teacher meetings which are a prominent and integral part of home-school communication throughout the school. The school reports success in gaining parents’ support in the implementation of the programme. Every effort should continue to be made to maximise parents’ participation in programme events and in planning for the programme.

Further contact with parents is maintained through the students’ LCA journals which are active documents, to be signed regularly by parents. Information entered in these journals includes records of the students’ work and progress. School reports for LCA students are issued at the same time as reports for all students, maintaining integration of the programme with the wider school. The quality of these reports indicates good practice. They are meaningful, being largely comment-based, and they provide information on the student’s progress and success in the completion of key assignments and tasks. Formative comment by the respective year head is also included. In addition to these reports generated by the school, the formal session results from the State Examinations Commission are relayed to parents and students in a timely manner. The relaying of these results often coincides with the issuing of school reports. Given the relative complexity of LCA assessment, it is suggested that the session reports should be accompanied by a short letter to explain the meaning of the number of credits awarded and to put the student’s achievement in context.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND CO-ORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The provision of a complete and comprehensive LCA programme plan is at an advanced stage. To continue the further development of the plan it is recommended that a complete two-year plan for each LCA class be devised at the outset including details of each course. The individual module plans should also be further developed, maintaining a consistent template, to include reference to the specific approaches and methodologies to be adopted in teaching the various elements or topics. Specific details of the assessment methods to be adopted should be included. It is urged also that, in general, the approaches taken to strengthen various aspects of the programme, such as links with the community or arrangements for visitors, be detailed in addition to the lists already included.

The use of literacy supports such as word banks is noted, in particular in relation to making the students comfortable with terminology specific to LCA. Materials have been circulated to the LCA team by the programme co-ordinator in relation to the further development of students’ literacy. This represents a good start in the development of a comprehensive focus on literacy and numeracy. It is recommended that such work be further reinforced by the development of an LCA policy on literacy and numeracy development. This policy should be included in the LCA plan.

The plan includes a clear, well-developed procedure for the selection of students. This procedure is in line with good practice and it details the role of the year head of third-year, class teachers, subject teachers, programme co-ordinators and the principal with regard to selection. Reference is also made to the part played by parents and to the provision of feedback to parents and students regarding the outcome of the selection procedure. The criteria used for selection are included and these are presented to the parents for their signature. Overall, planning for LCA is integrated into the whole-school planning process and the LCA plan is a recognised part of the school plan. This is good practice.
There is an appropriately constituted core LCA team that includes senior management. The team consists of the principal and deputy principal, the programme co-ordinator, the LCA co-ordinators, the year head and the guidance counsellor. It is good practice that the core team includes the teacher of a vocational specialism. The inclusion of the year head is also a strength as this provides further links with the whole school. The core team meets formally on two occasions per year at present and sometimes for an extra meeting when the need arises. This may be insufficient on its own to deal effectively with the co-ordination of the programme. It is acknowledged, however, that the programme is integrated into the structures of the school and issues relating to LCA are discussed at the weekly meetings of year heads as appropriate. Informal meetings are held regularly to ensure effective co-ordination of aspects of the programme such as arrangements for the support of students’ tasks. This is commendable and it is urged that these meetings be formalised to some extent to add to their effectiveness. It is recommended that brief, accurate records be kept of all such meetings.

There is a coherent system for transparently recording the completion of students’ key assignments. This system is based on the use of two recording instruments, the Student’s Journal and the teachers’ Report Handbook. Both of these documents are provided in the school. The Students’ Journal contains a daily diary used by students for personal reflection and also provides for signatures and dates to record completion of key assignments. The Students’ Journal also provides a channel of communication with parents regarding students’ attendance and work levels. Evidence of the completion of key assignments is held by the teacher of the course concerned and carefully completed record sheets are passed to the co-ordinator to maintain accurate records centrally. The storage of completed key assignments should be further regularised to ensure that evidence of completion for each student is stored centrally until the appeal period in session four has elapsed. It is recommended that a standard recording and storage procedure be adhered to for all courses.

Teachers follow good practice by meeting regularly to plan the cross-curricular aspects of the programme. These meetings are held on an informal basis. While the effectiveness of a flexible and informal approach to this planning is acknowledged, it is urged that care be taken to continue to provide clarity around the planning needed to ensure successful cross-curricular integration. Inclusion, in the LCA plan, of information about the scheduling of cross-curricular planning will help in this regard.

Valuable evaluation of the programme in the school has taken place on a number of occasions. Most recently this involved a review, in the current year, of the use of the LCA portfolio that has been developed in the school. This evaluative activity is very valuable. It is recommended that the format to be followed for annual evaluation of the programme be included in the programme plan. Such an evaluation should include inputs from parents, students, core team and the whole teaching staff. The recording of consistent evaluation outcomes over a number of years should then be used to inform further programme review and planning. There is evidence that previous evaluation of the programme has led to change of vocational specialisms and has led to further enhancement of planning and delivery of the programme. This responsiveness to course evaluation constitutes very good practice.

2.2 Co-ordination

The co-ordination of LCA in the school is very effective in helping to ensure the day-to-day implementation of the programme. The co-ordinators carry out their assigned duties diligently and comprehensively. Full records are maintained regarding student achievement, attendance,
communication with parents, minutes of formal team meetings and communications with the Department. The co-ordinators very effectively maintain links with parents and teachers regarding students’ attendance and progress.

The co-ordinating structures involve two LCA co-ordinators, each taking responsibility for one class group. These co-ordinators are not allocated time for the work of co-ordinating the programme. There is a programme co-ordinator appointed under the terms of Department Circular PPT 17-02. This co-ordinator is charged with the overall co-ordination of programmes. This co-ordination consists of presentations to parents, selection of students collaboratively with the core team, chairing meetings, organising literature for teachers, and dealing with all correspondence regarding LCA including returns to the Department. It is generally recommended with regard to the LCA that the co-ordinator or co-ordinators of the programme also teach at least one course to each of the class groups concerned. This recommendation is made in recognition of the role envisaged which is wider than the administration of the programme and includes the personal relationships between the students and the LCA co-ordinator. It is recommended in Scoil Carmel that the co-ordinators who teach the class groups be allocated some time, within available resources, to undertake at least some of the functions of programme co-ordination, or, alternatively, that the programme co-ordinator appointed under the terms of PPT17-02 be timetabled to teach the two class groups in LCA.

2.3 Curriculum

The school fully complies with relevant Department guidelines and circular letters regarding the curriculum presented in the programme. The curriculum is suitably broad and balanced. The vocational specialisms and elective modules provide for diversity. The vocational specialisms have been varied in response to students’ preferences in the past when Childcare and Community Care replaced Hotel Catering and Tourism. This reflects good practice. The other vocational specialism studied, Office Administration and Customer Care, together with elective modules in Religion and Hair and Beauty, provide a range of study that facilitates students in continuing in education or finding employment locally.

There is appropriate provision within the curriculum for students to develop their ICT skills. In addition to the ample time allocated to the Introduction to ICT course, other lessons are timetabled in the computer room for the vocational specialisms and a range of other courses including Vocational Preparation and Guidance, Social Education and for the completion of the Personal Reflection task.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Each of the lessons observed in the course of the evaluation reflected the planned programme for the respective courses. Planning and preparation provided well for a variety of approaches to be adopted and the teachers responded flexibly and appropriately to circumstances to achieve the planned outcomes. A wide range of teaching resources was in evidence in the lessons. When rain caused a planned activity in a Mathematical Applications lesson in the school car park to be abandoned, the teacher concerned skilfully moved to an alternative activity that could be undertaken in the corridor. The appropriate preparation had been done and a successful lesson resulted. Such detailed planning was typical in the lessons observed.
ICT was used very effectively in some of the lessons, both for the preparation of resource materials and for the students’ own research in the case of a lesson provided for the completion of tasks. In general, it is suggested that the good practice seen should be shared with all members of the LCA teaching team. The team should consider identifying the further development of ICT use as a priority and a focus for planning.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The lessons observed were coherently structured and students were skilfully guided through appropriate learning activities in almost all cases. Some very good teaching was observed. The expected outcomes of lessons were clarified at the beginning of each of the lessons observed. It is suggested that the LCA team consider negotiation and agreement of lesson outcomes with students, perhaps as an occasional variation on stating expected outcomes, as a means of further involving students in their own learning.

In each of the lessons, appropriate use was made of a range of questioning techniques and this approach was successful in establishing links with previous lessons and the students’ knowledge. Group work and pair work were used suitably in a number of lessons. Pairs of students engaged in very effective role play in a Hair and Beauty lesson and this provided very rich learning opportunities. It is recommended that the good practice seen in the use of group and pair work be shared among the whole LCA teaching team and that its use across the programme in general be increased.

While a wide range of different strategies were used in most lessons, with regular transitions between activities providing for different learning styles among the students, very occasionally the teaching approach was more teacher-led and unchanging. Although this teacher-led approach was effectively applied within its limitations, it did not make sufficient allowance for the differences in students’ learning styles. It is recommended, where such teaching tends to become dominant in lessons, that teachers re-focus on the fundamental principles of LCA. In particular, the principle of using active teaching and learning methodologies should be applied. The team-work approach, another of the fundamental principles of LCA, should provide teachers with support for the introduction of more active methodologies into all courses. The LCA teaching team in the school displays a highly-developed set of teaching skills that can be shared, adapted and applied across the curriculum.

Personal reflection is integral to the experience of the students and the use of the locally developed Student’s Journal in the support and enhancement of personal reflection is very valuable. The response of students in the lessons observed was indicative of a high level of engagement with the work of the lessons and with their peers and teachers. In answering questions, students displayed a knowledge and understanding that was consistent with expected learning goals being met. Students demonstrated their ability to apply their learning relevantly and appropriately across the curriculum. In a Social Education lesson, involving research on contemporary issues tasks, students used the ICT facilities very effectively and made good progress while learning independently. Students displayed knowledge and understanding of the work being done and displayed appropriate learning and self-management skills.

The students’ attitude to their work was positive and the atmosphere of the lessons was, in all cases, purposeful and co-operative, while they freely expressed their feeling of belonging in the programme when talking to the inspector. The physical learning environment was generally rich and stimulating with students’ work, as well as other subject-related materials, in evidence in most
rooms including the computer room. It is urged that the display of word lists in classrooms, to reinforce students’ learning of new words and terminology, be expanded and be used in all courses to support students’ literacy. Extra efforts should be made to provide a more visually stimulating learning environment in the small number of classrooms where the walls remain bare.

Throughout the lessons observed, classroom management was consistent and of a high standard. Students’ activities were effectively and sensitively managed. Discipline was an integral element of the classroom atmosphere which was one of co-operation between the students themselves, and between students and teachers, in line with good practice.

3.3 Assessment

Formal assessment of LCA students within the school conforms to the requirements of the programme, follows accepted guidelines, and is integrated with the whole-school assessment procedures. This is consistent with the overall integration of the programme in the life of the school which is a strength of its organisation. In the course of each of the lessons observed, informal assessment, often in the form of teacher questioning in a whole-class or one-to-one context, was integral to the teaching and learning taking place. The use of the structured LCA Students’ Journal provides a very good extra opportunity for students to engage in self-assessment. Assessment for learning approaches are prominent in the assessment of students’ work, in line with good practice.

The programme-teaching team is well experienced in the assessment of LCA students’ work at both formal level and informally. The teachers use this experience to review their teaching strategies continually and to modify them as needed in response to the assessment outcomes. This good practice leads to successful outcomes for the students.

Parents are provided with timely and meaningful information on their daughters’ progress and their engagement with the programme. There are well-developed procedures in place to monitor students’ attendance. A swipe-card electronic attendance monitoring system is in place in the whole school. The attendance recorded by this system is checked against the list of absences held in the school office. Instances of poor attendance are dealt with through the robust procedures in place as part of whole-school policy. In line with good practice, individual teachers record attendance at their lessons and these records are used in deciding the award of LCA module credits.

Parents are informed promptly by telephone of students’ absences and are informed from the outset of the implications of non-attendance for the award of credits. At the time of the evaluation, an SMS system for text messaging a range of communications to parents was close to implementation. This will further enhance the very good procedures for communication with parents.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The principal provides leadership and support for the effective implementation of the programme
• The co-ordination of LCA in the school is very effective in helping to ensure the day-to-day implementation of the programme.
• The LCA curriculum in the school is suitably broad and balanced, provides for diversity and responds to students’ preferences and needs.
• High quality planning and preparation provide well for a variety of teaching approaches and teachers respond flexibly and appropriately to circumstances to achieve planned outcomes.
• Some very good teaching was observed that should be further shared, adapted and applied across the curriculum as the need arises.
• Students show knowledge and understanding of the work being done and possess appropriate learning and self-management skills.
• The students’ attitude to their work is positive and the atmosphere of the classroom is purposeful, co-operative and encouraging.
• The programme-teaching team applies wide assessment experience of LCA, both formal and informal, continually to review teaching strategies and modify them as needed, in response to the assessment outcomes.

As a means of building on these strengths the following key recommendations are made:
• The LCA plan should be further developed and should include a formalised policy on literacy and numeracy.
• The storage of completed key assignments should be further regularised and a standard procedure should be adhered to.
• The co-ordinators who teach the class groups should be allocated some time for programme co-ordination, or, alternatively, the programme co-ordinator appointed under the terms of PPT17-02 should be timetabled to teach each of the class groups in LCA.
• The good practice of using group and pair work and the use of active teaching methodologies should be shared among the whole LCA teaching team.

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