EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE VOCATIONAL PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the LCVP in St. Finian’s 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 inspectors held meetings with the school principal 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 following the evaluation. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The LCVP was introduced into St. Finian’s College in 2000 and is now well established in the school. There is one class group in both fourth and fifth year. Fourth-year and fifth-year LCVP students are integrated into their respective year groups and come together as a distinct group only for link modules classes. However, they demonstrated a high level of awareness and appreciation of the benefits of participating in the LCVP during the course of the evaluation.

Responsibility for implementing LCVP rests with a core team comprising the two link module teachers, one of whom is the LCVP co-ordinator. Members of this team have been facilitated and encouraged to undertake relevant professional development. They have a very good working relationship and their work is characterised by co-operation and collaboration. Both teachers have a background in business subjects and have substantial experience of the LCVP. Consequently, they bring a depth of relevant knowledge and experience to the LCVP. Awareness of the LCVP among teachers generally is fair while vocational subject groupings (VSG) teachers are aware of LCVP students in their classrooms. The co-ordinator and core team are enthusiastic and hard-working and committed to both improving the implementation of the LCVP in the school and to meeting the needs of their students. The possibility of including another teacher on the LCVP team should be given consideration with a view to increasing the available expertise and also to increase the capacity of the team to accommodate change.

The school has been particularly successful in teaching the link modules aspect of the programme as a discrete entity. Awareness of the LCVP among teachers generally is only fair, however, and while the VSG teachers are aware of LCVP students in their classrooms, there is insufficient planned execution of the LCVP as an integrated cross-curricular programme. It is recommended that the LCVP team works towards raising awareness, at whole-school level, of the nature of the LCVP as an integrated programme. The use of LCVP-specific notice boards in the staffroom, announcing upcoming LCVP events, will raise the profile of the LCVP among staff in general. The provision, by management, of opportunities for the LCVP co-ordinator and team to brief
teaching staff regarding the aims and objectives of the LCVP will provide opportunities to highlight the centrality of cross-curricular work to the success of the LCVP.

This will also facilitate the exploration, with all subject teachers, of the links between their subjects and the link modules curriculum. Subject teachers can then be encouraged to highlight these elements of their subjects with students at appropriate stages during the year.

1.2 Resources

Fourth-year students are allocated one double period each week for link module classes and fifth years receive two single periods. Link module classes are timetabled against Physical Education (PE) and Applied Mathematics, with study arrangements for a small number of students who are not following these subjects. This timetable arrangement is restrictive for students and limits their subject options. It is recommended that these arrangements are reviewed and, subject to the availability of resources, consideration be given to the allocation of additional time to fourth year LCVP students. Every effort should be made to facilitate students in both following the LCVP and attending PE classes.

Guidance provision for LCVP students is the same as for all other senior cycle students. There is no specific direct class contact with the guidance counsellor as part of the LCVP curriculum. It is recommended that formal timetabled involvement of the guidance department is planned for and implemented, thus increasing the time allocation for link module students. In this manner, focused guidance support for LCVP students may be provided, for example when preparing curricula vitae, carrying out a career investigation and participating in work experience, at appropriate stages during the course of the school year.

Link module classes are held both in classrooms and in the information and communication technology (ICT) rooms. This has the advantage of allowing students to use computer facilities and the internet as required. Appropriate displays of LCVP-related material were evident on the classroom and ICT room walls.

LCVP-related funding is provided by management as required, at the request of the co-ordinator and in consultation with the LCVP team. There are no extra costs to students participating in the programme.

1.3 Student selection and support

Students and their parents are given timely and accurate information regarding available senior cycle programmes and are given good support in order that they may make informed programme and subject choices. The option to follow the LCVP is open to all third-year students. The LCVP team and the career guidance counsellor visit all third-year classes in March of each year to speak about the link modules and provide information to students. Subsequently, a parents’ information evening is held and a detailed information booklet is distributed.

Students with the appropriate subject groupings are encouraged to take the programme and an initial induction is given to these students at the beginning of the first year of the programme. The entrance criteria for the programme are in line with LCVP objectives.

Learning support, when provided, is not LCVP specific, but student specific. A range of interventions and supports are being provided currently, in line with the specific needs of the students concerned, through liaison with the learning-support department.
A good level of awareness of the LCVP among students, prior to their entry to the programme, was evident during the evaluation and there is evidence to suggest that a small number of students proactively target participation in LCVP because of the benefits associated with its completion.

1.4 Home-school links

Parents are fully briefed by the guidance department on the range of senior cycle options available to students and are involved in the process of programme and subject selection. Parent-teacher meetings are used in the usual manner to inform parents of students' progress and additional contact is as regular and frequent as circumstance demands. Parents are contacted by letter to inform them of specific LCVP-related events and activities, for example when making arrangements for work experience placements and visits out of school. Parents are welcome to contact the school to meet with individual teachers when required and are contacted individually if necessary.

St. Finian’s College has developed valuable links with a number of outside community and voluntary enterprises and businesses. Local businesses and employers are of great assistance to the school in providing work experience placements for students and also in providing expertise and support. Such links are used to source guest speakers on enterprise-related topics, for case studies of local enterprise, to provide opportunities for site visits and for general support and information in relation to careers and enterprise in general. The LCVP team is highly commended for its efforts to make and sustain such a variety of quality links with the local community.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The LCVP team has prepared a good plan for the implementation of the programme, following the format of the School Development Planning Initiative. It includes the aims and objectives of the programme, information on the implementation of the LCVP in St. Finian’s College, effective teaching methodologies and a term-by-term schedule for the delivery of the link modules course content for the two years of the programme.

It is recommended that the planning document be enhanced by the inclusion in the LCVP folder of documents such as checklists for portfolio preparation, available on the website of the LCVP support service at [http://www.lcvp.slss.ie/](http://www.lcvp.slss.ie/), details of voluntary and community organisations and business enterprises related to the programme and relevant Department of Education and Skills circulars. In line with the aims of the programme, particular emphasis should be placed on looking at ways of further encouraging students’ independent-learning and self-evaluation skills. It is also recommended that planning for the programme should include concrete steps to implement cross-curricular links, particularly with vocational subject groupings.

The co-ordinator is well supported in the role by school management and the other member of the core team. A strong spirit of collegiality and mutual support was evident among the core team and there is ongoing informal contact among team members to plan for the implementation of the programme. Members of the core team are commended for their hard work and their commitment to the further development of the LCVP in the college. Currently, the LCVP team does not hold regular formal meetings. To further facilitate the collaborative approach to planning for LCVP, to manage the events and activities that form a central part of the implementation of the LCVP, and in view of the aforementioned proposed expansion of the core team, it is recommended that
structures are put in place to facilitate regular formal meetings of the LCVP team. These meetings will also provide opportunities for teachers to share good practice. It is recommended that an agenda be prepared in advance of such meetings and that minutes are recorded and copied to school management.

At present, there is no practice of carrying out periodic formal reviews of the LCVP and its implementation. It is recommended that such a review be carried out annually. It is further recommended that specific procedures and success criteria be developed in order to facilitate this review. For example, success criteria might include the outcomes for students in the certificate examinations, the proportion of students who use the points gained for third-level applications and the overall level of demand for and participation in the programme. The review should be based on clear and realistic objectives for student attainment and for the implementation of the programme. The views of all relevant parties, including parents and students, should be sought and included and the outcomes of this review and evaluation process should then feed back into the planning process, with the ultimate aim of improving provision for students.

2.2 Co-ordination

The LCVP co-ordinator has extensive experience and a thorough knowledge of the programme having served in the role for ten years. The role of co-ordinator is linked to a post of responsibility and an appropriate time allowance is allocated per week for co-ordination duties. Resources and facilities, including ICT, are available to assist the co-ordinator in carrying out these duties. In line with best practice, the co-ordinator has timetabled contact with class groups and teaches the link modules.

The quality of programme co-ordination in the college is very good. LCVP co-ordination involves a broad range of duties including promoting the programme, organising student and parent information sessions, communication with management, staff, parents and external bodies, organising work experience and visits into and out of the school, maintaining records and delivering the programme. These duties are carried out effectively and the co-ordinator works hard to ensure the ongoing successful implementation of the programme. Going forward, the co-ordinator should maintain a lead role in promoting and developing the LCVP as a whole-school cross-curricular programme enriched and enhanced by the input of all subject departments.

2.3 Curriculum

A programme of activities and learning opportunities, leading to the preparation of portfolio items, is provided for students. All core portfolio items are addressed as part of the curriculum. Two optional items, a diary of work experience and a recorded interview, are also addressed within class. Portfolio items are prepared in school under the supervision of the co-ordinator and are stored in the school. There is good provision for students to develop their ICT skills throughout the programme. Due to the integrated approach implemented in the school, theory and practice are well integrated and, in carrying out activities leading to the preparation of the portfolio items, students also cover much of the theoretical content of the course.

Students carry out a number of activities as part of their programme of study. Examples of such activities include planning for and managing the visits of guest speakers to the classroom and visiting local enterprises. As well as providing students with opportunities for teamwork and with hands-on experience, these activities are the basis of the various reports and documents for the students’ portfolios. It is recommended that the variety of activities be broadened to include an enterprise activity, the conduct of which may lead to the preparation of a summary report, an
enterprise or action plan, or an enterprise report, thus offering students greater variety and choice in the preparation of portfolio items. There are many suggestions for such enterprise activities available at [http://www.lcvp.slss.ie/](http://www.lcvp.slss.ie/). When planning possible enterprise activities, the LCVP coordinator is encouraged to consider activities which offer opportunities to combine input from the range of subjects that the LCVP students are studying. In addition, completion of the *My Own Place* module should be considered in order to enhance the integrated approach to teaching the link modules and to provide further choice in the preparation of portfolio items.

Work experience and work shadowing are integral components of the programme. Students are well prepared in advance of these activities and they are facilitated to find their own work placements, with the support of the school. While a good level of contact is maintained with employers, it is recommended that, in so far as is possible, all workplaces are visited by school staff over the course of the placement period. This is in order to provide support for both students and employers as necessary and to ensure the successful running of placements. It is also recommended that students carry out their career investigations prior to beginning the work experience module, in order that they will be more informed when seeking work placements.

Satisfactory arrangements for an appropriate language module, as required by the syllabus, have not been made for those students who are not taking a modern European language other than Irish and English in the Leaving Certificate. Following discussion with the inspectors, school management has confirmed its intention to make arrangements for this module, consisting of one lesson per week over the course of the two years, or equivalent, in the coming school year. It is suggested that written accreditation should be provided by the school for those students who successfully complete this language module.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Section 2.1 of this report refers to long-term planning in relation to the implementation of the LCVP in the school. The work undertaken in lessons during the evaluation was in keeping with planning documents and reflected good short-term planning, in line with the requirements of the programme. Teachers were fully conversant 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 contributed significantly to the quality of students’ learning.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Good quality teaching was evident in all the classes visited. Lessons were well structured, with an appropriate balance between teacher-led and student-centered phases. A disciplined and focused atmosphere that supported an effective learning environment was apparent at all times. Teachers were warm, patient and considerate of their students. Their approach to their work was professional and business-like. Rapport with students was very good and lessons were characterised by a high level of interaction. The teachers had high expectations of their students and they supported them very well to meet these expectations.

Student input was sought and valued during the course of lessons and students were well affirmed for their efforts. The level of individual attention given to students facilitated a differentiated approach to teaching. This was evidenced by the manner in which teachers moved around the
classrooms assessing students, assisting and supporting them, and encouraging them to perform to the best of their abilities. Good progress was made in all lessons.

Students responded to their teachers’ efforts by working hard and engaging very well in the learning process. They demonstrated a positive attitude towards their work as evidenced by the level of engagement and interest observed. Student behaviour was excellent at all times.

Lesson content was in line with planning documents and included an analysis of a case study and preparation for a career investigation. There was an appropriate emphasis on subject-specific language. Teaching resources, such as the classroom whiteboard, the overhead projector and ICT resources were all appropriately used.

A variety of well-chosen active-learning methodologies, appropriate to the LCVP, was used to engage students and to support their learning. Both individual and group tasks were used as appropriate. The methodologies observed included discussion, use of handouts and work sheets, and questioning of students. Continuity from previous lessons was excellent and new information was well linked to previous learning.

Questioning of students was used effectively and students generally responded knowledgeably 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. A good mix of global and directed questioning techniques was used. In one lesson observed, very good questioning techniques were used to place the focus on students’ own thoughts when analysing a case study and to encourage them to explain their analysis.

Homework given was appropriate to the lesson content, was designed to reinforce the lesson, to consolidate learning and as a preparation for the next lesson.

3.3 Assessment

Good quality learning was evident from students’ level of engagement with learning activities, the questions they asked and the quality of their answers when questioned, the quality of their written work and the overall quality of outcomes in the certificate examinations. They successfully carried out the different tasks assigned to them during the lessons observed and they displayed a good level of knowledge and understanding during interaction with the inspectors.

Formative assessment of students is carried out on an ongoing basis by questioning in class, through correction of homework and also through the level of teacher movement and observation of students during class that was noted by the inspector. It is also noted that good use was made of past papers in preparing students for their link modules examination. It would be useful, in this context, to provide students with copies of the relevant marking schemes, available from the website of the State Examinations Commission (SEC) at www.examinations.ie. In addition, in order to encourage reflection and self-evaluation among students, it is recommended that they are given copies of the specific learning outcomes of the link modules and are encouraged to review these on an ongoing basis.

Good monitoring of students’ written work and draft portfolio items was evident and good quality feedback was provided to enable improvement. When a draft portfolio item has been prepared, it is reviewed by the teacher and returned to the student for follow up. This process is repeated until a final agreed standard is achieved. Thus, portfolio preparation is carried out under the direct supervision of teachers. This is excellent practice. In order to assist students in preparing high
quality drafts of portfolio items, it is strongly recommended that they are provided with a copy of the portfolio marking scheme. In addition, it is recommended that teachers encourage students to adhere strictly to set deadlines for the preparation and finalisation of their portfolio items in order to spread their workload over time.

Formal assessment of students’ progress in the link modules takes place only by means of mock examinations in fifth year following which they receive a progress report. It is recommended that formal, written, link module assessments are carried out more frequently, in line with assessments in all other subjects at senior cycle in the school and that assessment results and a relevant comment or progress report are included in all reports sent to students’ homes.

Students expressed a very positive attitude towards the LCVP and their participation in it during discussions with the inspectors. They stated that participating in the programme affords them different experiences of learning than in other subjects, particularly in relation to work experience opportunities, assists them with career choices and gives them the opportunity to gain more points in the Leaving Certificate examination. Writing and teamwork skills were also singled out by students as areas of significant improvement as a result of following the LCVP.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The LCVP is an important component of curricular provision in St. Finian’s College.
- The programme is managed and implemented by a dedicated and hard-working core team, the members of which have very good working relationships.
- Good support for the implementation of the programme is provided by school management.
- The school has been particularly successful in teaching the link modules aspect of the programme as a discrete entity.
- Good links are maintained with local voluntary and community enterprises and with local businesses.
- Good planning has been carried out to enhance students’ experiences of the programme.
- Appropriate, student-centred, active teaching and learning methodologies are used to teach the link modules.
- The LCVP has had a positive impact on the school and its students. Students demonstrated a high level of awareness and appreciation of the benefits of participating in the programme.

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

- It is recommended that the LCVP team works towards raising awareness, at whole-school level, of the nature of the LCVP as an integrated programme.
- It is recommended that timetabling arrangements and provision are reviewed and consideration be given to the allocation of additional time to fourth year students. It is further recommended that formal timetabled involvement of the guidance department is planned for and implemented.
- It is recommended that the LCVP planning document be enhanced by the inclusion in the LCVP folder of a range of documents as outlined in the text of this report. It is also recommended that planning for the programme should include concrete steps to implement cross-curricular links, particularly with vocational subject groupings.
• It is recommended that structures are put in place to facilitate regular formal meetings of the LCVP team.
• It is recommended that an annual review be carried out of the LCVP and its implementation. It is further recommended that specific procedures and success criteria be developed in order to facilitate this review.
• It is recommended that all LCVP students be given an opportunity to participate in an enterprise activity and that completion of the My Own Place module should be considered.
• It is recommended that students are given copies of the specific learning outcomes of the link modules and a copy of the portfolio marking scheme.
• It is recommended that formal, written, link module assessments are carried out in line with assessments in all other subjects at senior cycle in the school and that assessment results and a relevant comment or progress report are included in all reports sent to students’ homes.

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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 School is very pleased at the very positive report received by the LCVP Department.

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

Since the inspection adjustments to the programme and time tabling arrangements have been made so that in so far as possible the recommendations made have been implemented.