An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
LCA
REPORT

St Oliver’s Community College,
Drogheda, Co Louth.
Roll Number: 71761C

Date of inspection: 24 January 2011
EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED PROGRAMME.

INTRODUCTION

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

St Oliver’s Community College was built in 1980. It was under the auspices of the Town of Drogheda Vocational Education Committee (VEC) until January 1998 when this VEC was amalgamated with Co. Louth VEC. The school currently has 1123 students: 581 boys and 542 girls. The school is participating in the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme and has offered the LCA programme since 1999. 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

Whole-school support for the LCA programme in St Oliver’s Community College is very good. It is clear that morale within the teaching team is high. The teachers of the LCA programme who met with the inspector showed interest in and commitment to their students. They are encouraged and facilitated to avail of appropriate continuing professional development (CPD) and this has been undertaken by a large number of teachers. Those teachers who are new to LCA are supported by the co-ordinator and are directed to previous teachers of the module for additional support. This is commended.

Communication among the members of the teaching team, with the principal and with the whole staff is good. The programme is outlined in the school’s prospectus along with the other programmes on offer. A LCA notice board is displayed in the staff room and on a students’ notice board in the corridor outside the co-ordinator’s office. The co-ordinator provides regular updates on the LCA programme for all staff at staff meetings. Planning meetings are held on a weekly basis, minutes are recorded and these are supported by ongoing informal communication between the co-ordinator and the teaching team. It is recommended that the composition of the LCA planning team be reviewed. Best practice would include a member from each of the following areas: social education, vocational specialism, vocational preparation and guidance and the home school community liaison (HSCL) coordinator.

A whole-school approach to literacy and numeracy is evident. As part of DEIS planning, a detailed analysis of students’ literacy and numeracy needs has been carried out and is used to inform
planning for all programmes in the school. These good practices could now be developed into a whole school literacy and numeracy policy.

1.2 Resources

Teachers are appropriately assigned to teach the programme. Many of them have significant experience in teaching the different elements of the LCA programme. Information and communication technologies (ICT) are used effectively in organising the LCA programme. Students have good access to the school’s computer room. Commendably, classes have access to the requisite specialist rooms such as the Home Economics room and the Art room. In order to provide a base for the two class groups in both LCA 1 and LCA 2, it is recommended that management explore the feasibility of providing a base classroom for LCA. Further development of the students’ ownership of this room could be achieved by displaying their work and achievements. To enhance students’ literacy, it is recommended that the key words associated with specific topics or modules be displayed at appropriate times.

1.3 Student selection and support

It is good to note that the criteria used for selecting students to participate in LCA are in line with the objectives of the programme. An admissions policy for entry into LCA has been devised. This is commended. Students are required to complete a comprehensive application form where they outline their reasons for applying for LCA. They are also asked to sign a contract in which they agree to participate in all aspects of programme.

Good support and information with regard to LCA is provided to students and their parents during the selection process. A student induction programme is in place which is provided by the co-ordinator at the beginning of LCA 1. A system of year heads and form tutors work with the co-ordinator to support students’ emotional and academic development.

Supports for students with special education needs are provided through withdrawal, team teaching in English and Mathematics classes as well as the provision of small class groups.

1.4 Home-school links

Regular and frequent contact takes place between the school and the home. The HSCL teacher has a significant role in developing and maintaining good communication with parents. Key assignments and tasks provide good opportunities to engage the home and the local community. Parents are invited to attend the annual awards ceremony at the end of the programme and attendance was reported as high.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

A comprehensive range of documentation was provided at the time of the evaluation. This included an overview of the programme, its aims and provision. Planning should also include details of staff
and student induction and details of CPD attended in order to reflect the good practices already taking place.

Plans for individual modules have been devised and it is commendable that a common planning template is being used in the LCA programme. These plans outline the learning outcomes for each module as well as methodologies, resources and modes of assessment.

It is good to note that cross-curricular planning is identified in the overall LCA written plan. Planning for students with special needs is an integral part of the programme planning. The special-needs co-ordinator discusses the needs of the students with the LCA co-ordinator in advance of their entry into LCA. A number of the learning-support teachers are also involved in the delivery of support to LCA students.

2.2 Coordination

The co-ordinator has been with the programme for twelve years and was involved in its inception. The co-ordinator has a thorough knowledge of the programme and carries out a comprehensive range of duties to ensure the successful implementation of LCA. There is close co-operation between the LCA co-ordinator and the class teachers and this ensures the successful running of the programme. A dedicated time allowance is allocated for co-ordination duties, thus facilitating the effective implementation of the programme. Resources and facilities are available so that the co-ordination duties can be carried out effectively.

A consistent approach is adopted to administering and organising the records of the credit sheets and the student tasks. Other records pertaining to LCA are also retained by the co-ordinator. The programme co-ordinator maintains good communication with the school management, teachers, parents and the students. Relevant programme information is effectively disseminated to the school staff. The co-ordinator also teaches three of the four groups in both years of the programme. This is good practice as it helps to forge strong relationships with the students.

2.3 Curriculum

The school generally complies with the Department guidelines and circulars regarding the implementation of LCA. The majority of subjects are appropriately timetabled. Some subjects, however, are timetabled twice in the one day, for example French in LCA 1 and Social Education in LCA 2. Management should address these timetabling anomalies.

The school provides the following range of vocational specialisms: Engineering, Construction Studies, Hotel Catering and Tourism (HCT) and Office Administration and customer care. Elective modules include Active Leisure Studies, Visual Arts. Students also study Spanish or French in LCA 1 and Gaeilge Cumarsáideach in LCA 2. It is recommended that Gaeilge Cumarsáideach be delivered during the LCA 1 school year to support the continuity of the subject from the junior cycle. Students’ needs and interests, in addition to the resources available, were considered in the provision of subjects in LCA.

There is good provision within the curriculum for students to develop their ICT skills. An informal review of the programme that is conducted at one of the teaching-team meetings provides an opportunity to discuss the curriculum content in addition to other aspects of the programme. Furthermore, students in the second year of LCA complete an evaluation sheet. Building on this
good practice it is recommended that this review process be formalised, that the optional elements of the programme be examined and that such a formal evaluation involve all participants in LCA, including parents and sixth-year students.

Work experience is an integral part of the curriculum and is carried out by LCA 1 students every Thursday and LCA 2 students every Friday. Work experience placements are mostly secured by the students themselves, however; this was reported to be becoming increasingly more difficult. A practical and useful work experience diary has been devised by the teacher of Vocational Preparation and Guidance which allows students to record their experiences. An evaluation of the students’ work is completed by the employer.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Planning for the lessons observed was very good and included the preparation of handouts and worksheets. Teachers have devised a good range of resources to assist in the teaching and learning process. This is commended. The taught programme was seen to reflect the written plan for the programme. ICT was observed to be used effectively in the preparation of teaching and learning materials

3.2 Learning and teaching

Many elements of good practice were observed in the lessons. The aims and the learning outcomes were outlined at the beginning of all lessons, including those which involved students working in an independent manner. It is recommended that these outcomes be revisited, either with individual students or perhaps through whole-class discussion prior to the end of the lesson to ascertain achievement. This strategy would also help to develop students’ reflective skills.

Lessons were particularly well structured when a range of short activities was used in developing lesson content. The pace of lessons was generally appropriate. Care should be taken, however, to allow time for recapitulation at the end of all lessons.

Good linkage was observed between one lesson and the next. In instances where students’ experiences contributed to the lesson content, students’ interest was stimulated and this resulted in effective learning.

A variety of resources and assessment materials is effectively used to support teaching and learning. Active learning strategies such as paired work, team work and games were successful in enhancing learning and in providing opportunities for the development of oral communication and interpersonal skills. In one instance, team teaching was used very successfully to monitor, enhance and facilitate learning. This is highly commended.

Effective questioning strategies and discussion facilitated the development of students’ oral communication skills. This was particularly evident in lessons where students had to appoint a member to provide feedback to the rest of the class. This is good practice and it should be used to a greater extent. In some lessons, key words were written on the board, a practice which should feature in all lessons. In a number of instances, the main points of the lesson or prompts for students’ independent work were written on the board. This is commended. In one lesson, linkage
was cleverly made between numeracy and the associated language. It is recommended that all lessons include time to consolidate literacy and numeracy as appropriate.

Very good teacher-student and student-student rapport was evident in the lessons observed. Teachers supported students as they worked. Students’ contributions were encouraged and affirmed. Discipline was sensitively maintained, when necessary, and students were generally comfortable asking questions in the positive learning environment.

Students were generally enthusiastic, purposeful and co-operative in their work. The development of communication, literacy and numeracy skills, which is a principle of the LCA, was evident by the students’ abilities to communicate both orally and in written form, and by their active participation and engagement during lessons. The quality of students’ understanding was reflected in their ability to ask and answer questions. Students’ skills and competencies were demonstrated through their abilities to complete and record tasks.

3.3 Assessment

A range of assessment modes are regularly used to assess students’ competence and progress. These include key assignments, student tasks, questioning in class and formal pre-examinations. The level of students’ language and ICT skills is good. Key assignments and students’ tasks provided evidence of students’ work in this regard particularly the development of students’ understanding of social issues. Commendably, the development of students’ learning and independent working skills was observed in a number of lessons and was also evident in their completed work.

Students’ attendance levels are generally good as systems are in place for the effective monitoring of attendance. It is good to note that many students taking the programme have clear plans for future progression. During the evaluation they stated that work experience helped in this regard.

Students’ progress is conveyed to parents through reports, annual parent-teacher meetings and telephone communication as necessary. Students’ work is publicly celebrated and affirmed at the school’s awards night.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

• The co-ordinator has a thorough knowledge of the programme and carries out a comprehensive range of duties to ensure the successful implementation of LCA.
• Communication among the members of the teaching team, with the principal and with the whole staff is good.
• Regular and frequent contact takes place between the school and the home.
• There is good provision within the curriculum for students to develop their ICT skills.
• Very good teacher-student and student-student rapport was evident in the lessons observed.
• Students were generally enthusiastic, purposeful and co-operative in their work.
• Systems are in place for the effective monitoring of attendance.

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

• The composition of the LCA planning team should be expanded, to include teachers from a number of different specialisms.
• Gaeilge Cumarsáideach should be delivered during LCA 1 in order to support the continuity of the subject from the Junior Certificate.
• It is recommended that the review process be formalised to involve all participants in LCA, including parents and sixth-year students.
• At the end of each lesson, teachers should review the intended learning outcomes, either with individual students or through whole-class discussion, in order to ascertain student achievement.

Published October 2011