An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
REPORT

Coláiste Bríde
Enniscorthy, County Wexford
Roll Number: 63570W

Date of inspection: 11 February 2011
EVALUATION
OF
THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE VOCATIONAL PROGRAMME (LCVP)

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the LCVP in Coláiste Bríde, Enniscorthy, carried out as part of a whole school evaluation. 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 co-ordinator 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 programme co-ordinator and the core team at the end of the evaluation.

At the time of the evaluation, Coláiste Bríde, Enniscorthy, had a student enrolment of 799 girls. The school offers a range of subjects and programmes to meet the needs of its cohort of students: the Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY), the Leaving Certificate established and the Leaving Certificate Vocational (LCVP) programme. The LCVP was introduced into the school’s curriculum in Coláiste Bride in 1997, so it has a long established tradition in its senior cycle curriculum with a participation of approximately forty percent of the total senior cycle student cohort every year. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

As a programme which combines the academic strengths of the Leaving Certificate with a dynamic focus on self-directed learning, enterprise and work, the inclusion of the LCVP on the curriculum of Coláiste Bríde contributes to fulfilling the objectives of the school’s mission statement. To ensure the successful implementation of all aspects of the programme, senior management has deployed teachers to the LCVP teaching team that have a proven range of skills, qualities and expertise. As a result, the attainment of students in LCVP has been consistently good or very good over the years with students receiving a considerable number of distinctions and merits. There is whole-school awareness of the programme and acknowledgement of student achievement at school prize giving through the LCVP student of the year award. Senior management is commended for its visible commitment to the programme.

Strengths of the programme identified in the course of the evaluation include the good teaching observed, the commitment of the teachers to the programme and the engagement of students who clearly derive enjoyment from learning within the programme. School management facilitates regular meetings of the core team to review the programme as implemented. Such review will help to ensure that the self-directed vocational aspects of the programme receive due attention from year to year.
1.2 Resources

The most important resource for effective implementation of the programme is the team of teachers made available by school management. Members of the LCVP core team are from different subject backgrounds and the common denominator which first introduced teachers to the programme is their expertise in information and communication technologies (ICT). The specialisms of Business, Guidance and ICT are represented within the team. The breadth of qualifications, skills and qualities of the teaching team adds richness to the learning experiences for students and in the delivery of the Link Modules lessons. It is praiseworthy that an identifiable LCVP core team that works closely together is being firmly established. At the time of the evaluation, teachers new to the school and to the profession were benefiting from working closely with experienced teachers in the area.

The time allocation to the Link Modules is satisfactory with a double lesson period assigned in both year one and year two of the programme. However, in sixth year, lessons in the Link Modules are currently timetabled at the same time as lessons for Physical Education (PE), denying LCVP students’ access to PE. This should be avoided, and senior management should review this arrangement for coming years. The challenge for school management is finding an appropriate slot on the timetable to accommodate programme requirements in terms of time. Some possible solutions were discussed with the LCVP team and senior management. School management is encouraged to explore the optimal solution to the position of Link Module lessons on the timetable. As resources allow, the allocation of an additional single period in year one, if feasible, would facilitate students having dedicated time for completion of portfolio items on the computer.

1.3 Student selection and support

The defining factor for students is having the appropriate subject combinations to make them eligible for participation in the programme. Students with the appropriate vocational subject groupings (VSGs) are encouraged to apply for participation in LCVP. The main VSGs chosen by students are a combination of sciences, such as Biology and Chemistry, or Business with another subject, such as Home Economics or Art and Design. Currently, there are two class groups in both fifth and sixth year out of the total six class groups. The number of students opting for participation in the programme is increasing, and the school has created three LCVP groups in the past. Generally, LCVP students form part of the mainstream established Leaving Certificate groups and come together as a distinct group for Link Modules lessons and associated activities only.

Information on the programme is provided to parents and students at appropriate times of transition, in third year and at the end of TY which is an optional programme for students. It is suggested that senior management explore the possibility of former LCVP students addressing the parents and students at the information evening to outline the value of the skills acquired in the course of the programme, as well as the value of the Central Applications Office (CAO) points which students can accrue from completing the LCVP to access their chosen course of study. It has been the practice for the programme co-ordinator to compile an annual report on the implementation of the LCVP in that particular year which is commendable. It is recommended that this report be presented to the board annually and regular updates on the programme be provided at staff meetings.
All students fulfil the modern language requirement for LCVP, as all students are offered a choice of language on entry to the college and most students continue the study of a modern language into Leaving Certificate. Those students not pursuing a Leaving Certificate language are provided with one-to-one tuition in a school-based language module. The teachers involved in providing learning support to students also provide support and help to LCVP students with special needs, when required. The commendable practice of subject teachers assisting in creating cross-curricular links, an important aspect of LCVP, was very much in evidence in the school. Subject departments have contributed assistance to students in areas such as report writing, researching and making presentations and organizing events. The fact that students have previous knowledge from junior cycle Business Studies and skills from CSPE provide a foundation for learning on which the teachers can build.

The reasons given by the students for choosing LCVP were the possibility of gaining additional CAO points, the practical nature of the course content, the formative forms of assessment such as the portfolio, the focus on careers investigations and work experience and the development of ICT skills. A student contract of commitment, devised by the LCVP co-ordinator, has a two-fold purpose, to ensure that each student has the appropriate subject combination and to promote commitment to programme completion. While currently a double period is dedicated to programme induction, it is suggested that the possibility of an outing or event to initiate student induction be explored. Such an outing would provide an opportunity to establish with students the objectives of the programme from the outset and would help to ensure that learning can start from lesson one. The possibility of using a student application form when deciding student selection would introduce an element of self-evaluation.

1.4 Home-school links

The inclusion of the LCVP on the school curriculum helps to forge links with the local business community, with charitable organisations and with larger enterprises. The participation of the LCVP students in work experience and work shadowing placements raises the profile of the school in the community. The school has developed excellent links with a number of outside community and voluntary enterprises and businesses. The effective implementation of the programme from year to year would not be possible without the personnel and agencies external to the school. These links continue to be fostered and developed. Members of the LCVP teaching team also share personal or business contacts which can augment the database of possible visits-in or visits-out. The value of the support for the programme provided by local enterprises is acknowledged and the school has expressed its appreciation to these agencies and businesses.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

There is a current written plan for LCVP, which includes schemes of work for each year, outlined in terms of topics and themes and specific learning outcomes to be achieved. The LCVP team is encouraged to draw on the blueprint for planning available on the LCVP website which provides an optimal format and template for the plan. The inclusion of some more details would enhance the existing plan, such as the calendar of events for LCVP students in a given year, a database of work placements, a list of visits-in and enterprises for visits-out. The annual report on the LCVP provides evidence of review and refinement to the programme from year to year. The integration of some elements of evaluation and review, such as surveys or questionnaires for parents and
students, would provide invaluable insights into the success of the programme for students. The plan also shows careful monitoring of student attainment in certificate examinations.

School management facilitates formal meetings of the LCVP team through the provision of a slot for regular meetings on the school timetable. On such occasions, the co-ordinator and LCVP team of teachers review what is working and has worked well in a given year. In addition, planning time is integrated into each teacher’s timetable and ongoing informal meetings take place among the team. This is praiseworthy. Minutes of planning meetings are kept and items for discussion include ongoing monitoring of student portfolio work, the acquisition of recording equipment, ICT issues, continuity of teachers from year one to year two, ensuring students comply with the correct subject combinations for the VSGs. Matters discussed at planning meetings are brought to the attention of the principal for advice, action or decision.

2.2 Coordination

The current LCVP and programme co-ordinator was instrumental in introducing the programme to the school and has been involved in its implementation from the outset. The co-ordinator’s expertise in Business and her many years of delivering both the syllabus content of the Link Modules as well as providing an organisational cohesion to a programme have helped to ensure the success of the programme in Coláiste Bride. The co-ordinator’s role and duties are clearly documented. The programme co-ordinator has overarching responsibility for the organisation of work experience for both TY and LCVP and has a central role in liaising with students, teachers and employers regarding work experience. The co-ordinator brings commitment to the work, ensuring efficiency of timing and implementation. The process as outlined is thorough and systematic, and employers are provided with an opportunity to give oral feedback on the student’s work experience. The design of a template by the co-ordinator for the employer to report on the student’s completion of the work experience would provide a valuable written record of student performance which the LCVP students can then draw upon in their own reporting.

There is an LCVP folder available for all Link Module teachers. This is especially important when teachers involved in the programme have to be replaced, as was the case at the time of the evaluation. The most effective aspects of the programme, as identified by the LCVP co-ordinator and the students, are the ICT, presentation, interview and interpersonal skills developed by students.

2.3 Curriculum

What has been particularly effective in developing such skills are the enterprise activities, the work experience and the links with the charitable organisations in the community. The links the school has established with local businesses and enterprises are also central to the quality of the case studies of enterprises and career investigations. The students are introduced to enterprise in different ways, through visits-out to local enterprises and visits-in from speakers from the surrounding area giving students insights into the world of business and work. These visits also involve students in fulfilling different roles and completing different tasks in relation to the many aspects of the visit. The enterprise activities vary, including such activities as organising a school fund-raising walk, sports day as well as cake sales and other events. Participation in such activities requires each student to take responsibility for one aspect of the activity and each student experiences teamwork on a larger scale which adds to their learning. The LCVP team is encouraged to explore the possibility of the organisation of enterprise activities in smaller groups, which bring an element of competitiveness to the enterprise activity. Examples include creating
different crafts to sell at a crafts’ fair, the creation of a school calendar with photographs of the locality or archival school photographs, or the design of a heritage trail in the locality.

While Link Modules lessons are concurrently timetabled with guidance lessons, the contribution of the guidance counsellor to honing the skills of students and providing direction and support to programme implementation is acknowledged. The involvement of teachers from other subject areas includes Religion, Business, English, Art, home Economics.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN THE LINK MODULES

3.1 Planning and preparation

The benefit derived from attendance of teachers at LCVP in-service was evident in the quality of programme delivery and in the appropriate materials deployed. There was good planning and preparation, with appropriate resources and materials ready. Careful planning facilitated the systematic integration of a sequence of learning and teaching activities into the lessons.

3.2 Learning and teaching

All lessons observed opened with roll call and with teacher monitoring of student attendance. In all cases, teachers shared the lesson objectives with their students, either by clearly recording them on a flip chart, or referring to a student hand-out in their LCVP folder. Lessons were therefore characterised by clarity of direction and students were made aware of where the lesson was placed in the overall objectives of the programme. There was consistent use of the specific learning outcomes (SLOs) by teachers, recommended in programme guidelines, thus ensuring student reflection on learning. Both the fifth-year lessons observed, involved a debriefing activity whereby the students evaluated their own and their group performance and gave feedback to their teachers on the activity in question. It was interesting to note that the first question related to student enjoyment of the activity. Teachers were effective in drawing out students, seeking contributions from named students, when necessary, and encouraging and motivating students to express their views. The questions posed by the teachers required reflection on the part of the students as well as awareness of their own performance, expectation and development. What ensued was an interesting interactive discussion which is very good practice. Both the approach and the lesson content were appropriate to the students’ stage of learning in the programme.

The continuity of learning from year one to year two was evident in the sixth year double lesson observed. There was an excellent cohesion to the sequence of the lesson, whereby all aspects of the lesson were interlinked and the homework assigned served to consolidate the learning and to prepare for an examination question. Lesson content included relevant references to previous experiences as well as awareness of the need for preparation of strategies for the examinations and the assessment of portfolio items. The teacher explained terms and concepts, when necessary, and created links with previous learning. Students were also asked to provide definitions of terms. The students received positive affirmation from the teacher in relation to their responses and suggestions and the contributions from a number of students demonstrated sound knowledge and understanding. The learning from relevant Leaving Certificate subjects was referred to in the context of cross-curricular relevance. The display of the portfolio items to be completed on the computer room wall as well as posters of different voluntary organisations provided visual support for the learners and is commended. The content of the material was appropriate and relevant to the students and students read, listened and watched the audio-visual case study with interest.
When students were asked to work in small groups, they organised themselves into groups easily and quickly. There was good participation and students engaged in tasks set and proved to be co-operative learners. Prior to the group work on one occasion, students were asked to engage in silent or pair reading first. On another occasion, students’ answers were gathered and then students concluded with two minutes of personal reflection. These are effective strategies to focus on the development of individual and personal skills and to stimulate students to reflect on what they had learnt. This is in line with the recommended approach for LCVP. The approach adopted by teachers, where they directed the learning initially, then followed this with the effective integration of learning activities ensured both student engagement and development of knowledge and skills. There was excellent rapport between teachers and students.

In one lesson observed, the students had already completed the evaluation sheet on conclusion of the activity. What followed was an interesting and stimulating discussion among students facilitated by the teacher. On another occasion, students were asked to complete an evaluation questionnaire relating to a visit-in during class time which took up valuable lesson time and may have been better completed as homework in preparation for the lesson. Nevertheless, a fruitful discussion ensued and the teacher facilitated the discussion well. Teachers were thorough in their approach, referring back to the questions asked and the responses received in the course of the activity. On occasions, taking a “think, pair, share” approach allows students to share their experience in pairs and then in small groups. This can result in a broader discussion and inform and enrich their learning. The use of examples of local entrepreneurs provided an additional familiar dimension which facilitated student interest and learning.

The inclusion of the cross-curricular perspective was particularly praiseworthy and students reflected on the ways in which knowledge and skills from other subjects were drawn upon in the course of the activity. Students were given references of websites through which they could research further information. This is praiseworthy and in line with the objective of self-directed learning. One lesson closed with a discussion by the group on how they were going to set about writing a summary report and students demonstrated good knowledge and perception. Teachers demonstrated an awareness of abilities and differing learning styles and motivation of students.

3.3 Assessment

There was careful monitoring and recording of student attendance in class, there was a good level of detail in evidence in the correction of portfolio items and attention to adherence to deadlines. Attainment is consistently high with almost without exception full pass rate and a good range of merits and distinctions.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- To ensure the successful implementation of all aspects of the programme, senior management has deployed teachers to the LCVP teaching team who have a proven range of skills, qualities and expertise.
- There is a current written plan for LCVP, which includes schemes of work for each year, outlined in terms of topics and themes and specific learning outcomes to be achieved.
- It has been the practice for the programme co-ordinator to compile an annual report on the implementation of the LCVP in that particular year which is commendable.
• The students are introduced to enterprise in different ways, through visits-out to local enterprises and visits-in from speakers from the surrounding area giving students insights into the world of business and work.

• Lessons were characterised by clarity of direction and students were made aware of where the lesson was placed in the overall objectives of the programme. There was consistent use of the specific learning outcomes (SLOs) by teachers, recommended in programme guidelines, thus ensuring student reflection on learning.

• The approach adopted by teachers, where they directed the learning initially, then followed this with the effective integration of learning activities ensured both student engagement and development of knowledge and skills.

• The inclusion of the cross-curricular perspective was particularly praiseworthy and students reflected on the ways in which knowledge and skills from other subjects were drawn upon in the course of an activity.

• The attainment of students in LCVP has been consistently good or very good over the years with students receiving a considerable number of distinctions and merits.

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

• In sixth year, lessons in the Link Modules are currently timetabled at the same time as lessons for Physical Education (PE), denying LCVP students’ access to PE. This should be avoided, and senior management should review this arrangement for coming years.

• It is recommended that the annual report on the implementation of the LCVP be presented to the board annually and regular updates on the programme be provided at staff meetings.

• The LCVP team is encouraged to draw on the blueprint for planning available on the LCVP website which provides an optimal format and template for the plan.

• Ongoing review and evaluation should ensure that the self-directed vocational aspects of the programme receive due attention from year to year.

*Published October 2011*