An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Applied
REPORT

Beech Hill College
Monaghan, County Monaghan
Roll Number: 72210Q

Date of inspection: 30 April 2010
EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) in Beech Hill 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 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 and the programme co-ordinator at a subsequent post-evaluation meeting.

Beech Hill College is a co-educational school under the auspices of Co. Monaghan Vocational Education Committee (VEC). The school, through its participation in the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) initiative, benefits from a range of additional resources and supports to assist in addressing the needs of students who suffer from educational disadvantage.

In keeping with its ethos, the school is committed to providing a broad curriculum programme to meet the needs of all its students. LCA, which has been available in the school since 1995, plays a significant role in this regard. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The LCA programme is an integral component of the school’s senior-cycle curriculum. During the course of the evaluation very successful student outcomes of LCA were noted. Students spoke very positively about their experiences on the programme and high student transfer rates to further education and apprenticeships were reported by staff.

There is a very good level of whole-school support for LCA. Leadership of the programme has been delegated to a programmes co-ordinator. The principal and relevant staff have a good knowledge and understanding regarding the implementation of the programme. Effective levels of ongoing communication exist between the programme co-ordinator and key personnel such as the principal, year heads, home-school-community liaison co-ordinator and learning support team. Frequent use is made of staff memos and staff-room notice board to ensure that all staff members are aware of upcoming LCA activities. These very good practices provide for a holistic and integrated approach to the management and support of LCA students.

The programme is reviewed annually by the principal, programme co-ordinator, relevant year head and teachers. There is scope to extend and formalise this review process. It is recommended therefore that a formal review of the programme be undertaken each year in consultation with staff, parents and the current LCA students. The outcomes of each review should be documented and used to inform ongoing planning for the programme. The outcomes and subsequent actions arising from each review should be forwarded to the board of management.
1.2 Resources

The teaching of LCA subjects is rotated among all staff within each relevant subject department. While this practice can build capacity it needs to be kept under close review for a number of reasons. In the first instance, in any academic year a large number of teachers is involved in teaching the programme. Therefore it is difficult to achieve close levels of collaboration in planning for programme delivery. Secondly, in the case of larger subject departments or one where there are a lot of staff changes, the infrequent participation by teachers in delivering the programme results in a high level of turnover within the LCA team. This may militate against teachers developing a deeper level of skill and expertise in teaching LCA. It also makes meaningful reflective practice from an individual teacher and team perspective difficult.

The programme co-ordinator provides a good level of assistance to new teachers of LCA as part of their induction programme. There have been some good levels of engagement with relevant continuing professional development (CPD). This has proved effective in supporting programme implementation. To support the continued provision of a high-quality programme, on-going engagement with LCA-specific CPD is necessary. Therefore the teaching team should carry out a needs analysis to identify support requirements and to inform the development of a CPD plan. It is suggested that a copy of the information supplied at each in-service course attended be filed in a programme-specific CPD folder and should be stored in the LCA office room. This would ensure that the information is available to each member of the team and could be referred to when required.

A very good range of resources is available to support programme implementation and coordination. The programme co-ordinator has a fully equipped LCA office. Students have good access to well-equipped specialist rooms, some of which have recently been upgraded to a very high standard. Students have very good access to information and communications technology (ICT). In addition to the ICT rooms many of the specialist rooms have dedicated ICT resources. To support quality learning in Craft and Design, it is recommended that the art department be provided with dedicated ICT resources when funding permits.

A number of issues regarding the timetabling of LCA needs attention. At the time of the evaluation there was a disproportionate relationship between the amount of teaching time allocated to the electives in year one and year two when balanced against the number of credits being awarded. This issue should be addressed in the context of future timetabling. In almost all instances there is a very good spread of lessons across the week to assist effective continuity in teaching and learning. In the case of French however, the timetabling of two single lessons on the same day of the week should be avoided. The titles used for some of the subjects are misleading on the school’s LCA timetable. To positively support the profile of LCA throughout the school community it should only be the official title of all of the LCA subjects that is used on the master timetable and student timetables.

1.3 Student selection and support

A systematic student selection process for LCA is in place. There is a good level of collaboration between the guidance counsellor, the programme co-ordinator, year heads and the senior management team to support this process. It is noteworthy that as part of the selection process students must complete an application form outlining their reasons for applying for admission to
the programme. This is good practice. It would prove beneficial to include the general criteria used by the school for admission into LCA in its overall admissions policy.

A very good induction programme assists students settle into LCA. The revised arrangements introduced this year, where the elements of the induction programme are delivered over a number of days, is indicative of very good practice. Consideration could be given to inviting parents to attend a session as part of the induction programme. This would provide an opportunity for parents of the new LCA students to get additional clarifications and to meet relevant staff.

The guidance department plays an active role in providing personal support for LCA students on a one-to-one basis. A student-destination survey is carried out annually and a very good level of contact is maintained with past-pupils. This level of commitment to past-pupils of the programme is indicative of the atmosphere of care that permeates the school.

There is a good level of ongoing collaboration between members of the learning support team and the LCA teachers. In instances where students have an individual education plan (IEP) it is particularly good practice that the learning support co-ordinator meets with the LCA teachers as part of the initial planning and ongoing review processes.

1.4 Home-school and community links

Very good efforts are made to positively promote the LCA programme and to celebrate student achievements through events such as the annual information and open evenings and graduation night. Good links are made with the local community through students’ participation in work experience, and through the completion of their practical achievement tasks.

The home-school-community liaison co-ordinator takes an active role in supporting the parents of LCA students. There is regular contact between the programme co-ordinator and the home-school-community liaison co-ordinator to support this process. Student progress is reported to parents at the annual parent-teacher meeting and through school reports.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

Programme planning is the responsibility of the entire LCA team of twenty teachers which is led by the programme co-ordinator. Management facilitates meetings of the entire team usually three times during the year, though at the time of this evaluation only one meeting had been held during the current academic year. Minutes are recorded to facilitate continuity between meetings. During the evaluation it was apparent that team members are very committed to LCA and display a high level of enthusiasm for the continued development of the programme in the school.

In recognising the significant challenges involved in organizing and ensuring full attendance at regular meetings of such a large group of people, it is recommended that a smaller core planning team be established. This is a necessary step to alleviate the workload of the programme co-ordinator. Membership of the core team should be representative of the different components of the programme. The remit of the team should include assisting in the systematic planning, monitoring and evaluation of the programme.
Some good practice was evident in the programme planning folder. However, based on the evidence available, programme planning is carried on primarily on a yearly basis. This practice needs to be reviewed. It is recommended that a two-year programme framework, that encompasses all aspects of the vocational education, general education and elective areas, be devised for each student cohort from the outset and included in the LCA programme planning folder. This would support the development of cohesive programme plans for each subject area.

2.2 Coordination

The programmes co-ordinator, appointed under Circular Letter PPT 19/02, co-ordinates the LCA in the school. The co-ordinator is very committed to the task and demonstrates a very good knowledge of the programme and its implementation. However, the duties attached to the position of programmes co-ordinator in Beech Hill College merit review. The co-ordinator has complete responsibility for all aspects of implementing both the LCA and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LVCP) in the school. The co-ordinator’s tasks are very wide-ranging; they include organising work experience and student interviews for both programmes, overseeing all aspects of the examinable components of each programme, supporting the staff as well as liaising with parents and external agencies. It is recommended that school management reviews the sustainability and appropriateness of these arrangements. The co-ordinator is currently engaged in delivering programmes in a further-education college which is located off-site. While the contextual factors leading to this arrangement are recognised, it does limit the availability of the co-ordinator to engage in the delivery of the LCA programme to both year groups in Beech Hill College. In the context of future timetabling, the LCA co-ordinator should be timetabled to have class contact time with each year group.

2.3 Curriculum

The subjects offered as part of LCA provide diversity and facilitate students in continuing in education or finding employment. Some good practice was noted in taking students’ needs and interests into account in planning for the vocational specialisms and electives offered as part of the programme. The school has the capacity to offer a wide range of LCA subjects. In this context, the feasibility of offering a wider range of subjects as part of LCA should be considered. For instance, the school could provide prospective LCA students with a list of possible subjects that could be offered as vocational specialisms, electives or arts-education modules within the resources currently available in the school. This initial survey could then inform the actual range of subjects planned for the two-year programme of each LCA cohort.

Comprehensive procedures are in place to support the work experiences modules. The school’s expectation for LCA students to experience different work placements is good practice. The support process for work experience is an integral part of the curriculum. Teachers are timetabled to visit the students while at work. The students complete work experience diaries which include personal reflections, and reports are received from employers on completion of the module. These are very good practices. The vocational preparation and guidance lessons contribute positively to students’ learning experiences arising from their work-experience placements.

A good range of additional co-curricular activities contributes positively to students learning in LCA. A designated LCA notice board is situated outside the LCA office. The potential of this notice board as a means of displaying student activities and celebrating achievements could be enhanced.
3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Planning for delivery of each subject has traditionally been the remit of the individual subject teacher. There was considerable variation in the quality of the subject plans provided during the evaluation. In some instances the subject plan only documented the content to be covered for one year of a two-year syllabus and in one instance the content outlined was not fully in keeping with the syllabus requirements. In a number of other subject areas, the plans outlined the content to be covered in each year of the course. This information was summarized into thematic units of work that included an outline of students’ expected knowledge and understanding in terms of learning outcomes. Specific learning activities together with some information on the summative and formative assessment strategies to be deployed were also included. It is recommended that this very good practice be extended to all subjects.

To facilitate consistency in planning practice it is recommended that the co-ordinator, in association with the core team, devise a planning template that could be used by all subject areas. The template designed by the LCA/SLSS support service could prove a useful resource available from the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). The template should enable students’ expected knowledge and understanding to be outlined in terms of learning outcomes. Specific methodologies, suitable timeframes, appropriate resources and assessment strategies should also be documented. Responsibility for the further development and on-going review of subject plans should be the collective remit of each subject department team. It is recommended that a copy of each subject plan should also be retained in the LCA programme planning folder.

In keeping with the aims of the LCA programme a range of co-curricular activities is planned to enable students’ to reinforce and apply classroom learning. Cross-curricular linkages are supported primarily through the completion of student tasks. However, observation of lessons and students’ work indicated that more effective cross-curricular planning needs to be established in the delivery of some course modules. It is recommended that the core team investigate possible synergies that exist across subject areas. To assist ongoing cross-curricular planning and support learning, common areas of the course should be routinely discussed at team meetings. Agreed approaches to the delivery of common topics should be devised and put in place. The inside cover page of module descriptor booklets is a useful starting point to highlight possible overlaps and facilitate collaboration.

The school is currently devising a whole-school literacy and numeracy policy. This work is being led by a sub-committee of relevant staff as part of the school’s engagement with DEIS action planning. It is recommended that the LCA core team, in collaboration with the DEIS sub-committee explore and agree a range of strategies to support literacy and numeracy across all LCA subjects. This would complement the work in literacy support currently underway in junior cycle by providing continuity for students.

There was evidence of good quality advance planning for the lessons observed. However, in the case of one ICT class it was noted that it is routine practice that work assigned by other teachers takes precedence over the planned ICT lesson. This practice needs to be reviewed, as students have a dedicated course to complete in ICT. It is recommended that a more robust system in allowing students complete work from other subject areas during ICT time be agreed between the ICT teacher and subject departments.
In all of the lessons observed a variety of additional resources, such as exemplar materials, worksheets and handouts were prepared in advance to support learning. ICT was used effectively in the preparation of a number of these resources. In all instances teachers prepared individual lesson plans to support lesson delivery and some very good quality individual teacher planning and resource folders were noted. This information should be used to inform the development of subject plans as recommended earlier.

3.2 Learning and teaching

In all of the lessons observed learning and teaching took place in a secure and supportive environment. A very good rapport was apparent between teachers and students and a climate of mutual respect was evident and encouraged. Students were regularly affirmed and teachers responded with sensitivity to student comments when classroom discussion took place. In the social education lesson observed very good attention was paid to implementing ground rules for class discussions. This practice proved very effective in establishing appropriate boundaries for what should be raised and discussed in class.

All of the lessons observed had a clear focus and were purposeful. In some instances the key learning objectives for the lesson were shared with students from the outset. This strategy proved effective in ensuring that students understood the relevance of the content being studied and assisted in the development of a logical lesson structure. It is recommended that the learning outcomes be shared with students from the outset of all lessons. To optimise the formative-assessment potential of this strategy time should be taken towards the end of each lesson to revisit the planned learning intentions. This would provide an opportunity for teachers to assess students’ learning, to affirm effort and to offer further clarifications where needed.

A very good range of teaching methodologies appropriate to LCA was evident in the lessons observed. Teacher explanations were clear and deliberate efforts were made to link the information being taught to students’ previous knowledge to support learning. Some very good efforts were made to link the concepts being taught with the students’ own locality to enhance understanding. In one lesson based on the topic Looking for Work very good use was made of advertisements from the local newspapers to encourage students to actively engage in the learning process. In other lessons observed some very effective use was made of ICT such as video clips and websites to support learning.

Some very good practice was noted in supporting students’ literacy development. In one classroom posters displaying the key words associated with the topics covered during the year were actively used during the lesson. In other lessons students underlined or noted key points while teachers paid very good attention to ensuring that students understood the key terminology being used.

Students’ personal and social development was supported effectively in lessons. Students displayed a good level of ability to work on their own, in pairs or in small groups. This good practice is in keeping with the philosophy underpinning the programme.

Some very good practice in supporting learner autonomy and student creativity was noted. In one lesson observed students were beginning the initial stages of analysing a design brief task. During the lesson students were challenged to think independently and to use their creative abilities to interpret a theme. This was done through the use of exemplar materials and teacher-guided discussion coupled with effective higher-order questioning. Students responded very well to these challenges and remained highly engaged in the process. Observation of a range of students’
coursework from other subjects indicated that there is scope to extend this very good practice. As students complete the various coursework components required for LCA particular attention should be given to avoiding an over-reliance on teacher-led interventions such as the use of templates in assisting students.

Students displayed a positive attitude towards learning and were purposeful as they carried out classroom tasks. A good range of ICT skills was evident among students in the completion of coursework. Some very good practice was noted in the maintenance and organisation of student notebooks. Classroom environments in some instances were very stimulating and supportive of student learning. The display of up-to-date information on themed notice boards that were specific to LCA is noted as particularly good practice.

3.3 Assessment

On-going assessment strategies used by individual teachers include the completion of key assignments and tasks, in addition to in-class activities such as questioning or the ongoing monitoring of coursework. Teachers routinely provide a high level of ongoing in-class support to enhance student achievement.

A review of a random sample of students’ coursework folders indicated some good practice in assigning homework or class activities to reinforce, apply or extend classroom learning. There were noteworthy examples of teachers providing written feedback for students, in line with the principles of assessment for learning (AFL). However, there is significant scope to extend this practice. To support learning and assess progress, students need to be provided with further opportunities to complete written activities or independent activities that can be taken up and monitored by class teachers. Consideration should be given to the use of comment-only marking and other AFL strategies as a means of providing constructive feedback to students and supporting them in preparation for all of the assessment components of LCA.

At the time of the evaluation, evidence of students’ satisfactory completion of key assignments was available for almost all subject areas. In a small number of subjects, this was not the case. This is not good practice. It is recommended that a robust system should be put in place for the storage of students’ key assignments. Evidence of students’ satisfactory completion of all key assignments for each module completed must be retained until the student has completed the two years of the programme and the final results of all sessions have been issued.

Very good planning for the completion of key assignments was evident in a number of subjects subject. However, the quality of the organisation, maintenance, and layout of completed key assignments varied across different subject areas. It is recommended that the core team discuss and agree best practice in relation to the organisation and presentation of completed key assignments. As teachers plan a programme of work for each module, it is essential that the students complete the key assignments as outlined in the module descriptor in order to be awarded the credits. This does not impact on an individual teachers’ ability to differentiate the learning experience to challenge the complete range of student abilities. Success criteria for the completion of each key assignment should be shared with students from the outset.

Currently, LCA students only sit one set of formal in-house examinations, namely the mock certificate examinations in year two of the programme. To provide additional summative assessment opportunities and to support the development of examination techniques, it is recommended that formal in-house examinations be organised for year one LCA students in line with the school’s policy for other senior cycle programmes. The modes of assessment employed
should be informed by the range of assessments used in the LCA examination for each subject area.

A review of the programme plan made available to the inspector indicates that there are good systems in place for record keeping in relation to student attendance and the externally examinable components of the programme. In line with the school’s attendance strategy, students’ attendance is systematically recorded by teachers and tracked by the programme co-ordinator. Records of students’ absences are maintained by school and very good follow-up contact is maintained with parents.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The LCA programme is an integral component of the school’s senior-cycle curriculum.
- Staff members are very committed to LCA and display a high level of enthusiasm for the programme.
- A very good range of resources is available to support programme implementation.
- The co-ordinator is very committed and demonstrates a very good knowledge of the requirements of the programme.
- A holistic approach is adopted to the management and care of LCA students.
- The school has the capacity to offer a wide range of LCA subjects.
- Comprehensive procedures are in place to support the work experience modules.
- In all lessons observed teaching and learning took place in a secure and supportive environment.
- A very good range of teaching methodologies appropriate to LCA was evident in the lessons observed.
- Teachers routinely provide a high level of ongoing in-class support to enhance student achievement.
- Good systems are in place for record keeping in relation to student attendance and the externally examinable components of the programme.

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

- A formal review of the LCA programme should be undertaken each year in consultation with staff, parents and the current LCA students.
- The formal structures that support the co-ordination and planning of LCA should be re-examined; in particular, a core team should be established.
- A two-year programme framework, that encompasses all aspects of the vocational education, general education and elective areas should be devised for each student cohort from the outset and be included in the LCA programme planning folder.
- Subject plans should be further developed and cross-curricular synergies explored. A copy of all subject plans should be retained and included in the LCA planning folder.
- Summative and formative assessment practices should be reviewed to ensure that students’ work is regularly assessed and appropriate levels of feedback is provided.
• Evidence of students’ satisfactory completion of all key assignments for each module must be retained until the student has completed the two years of the programme and the final results of all sessions have been issued.

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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

Response to Points made in Programme Evaluation Report (LCA) regarding the practice of completing work assigned within other subjects/module while in ICT

1. Rationale for ICT in LCA includes specific reference to “applying these skills in a practical way, particularly in presenting task work and key assignments across the full spectrum of the curriculum” - one ICT Key Assignment (Module 1) for example actually involves specific work from any other module with ICT, “I have used a word processor to create, store and print a report or assignment for any other module”.

2. Integrating work from other subjects assists with the cross-curricular object of this programme

3. Reference is made to the dedicated course to complete in ICT – this dedicated course was and continues to be fully followed (in fact the examiner indicated verbally that the context and standard of specific key assignments issued, in fact exceeds that required).

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

- It is planned to include parents and existing LCA students in the formal annual review of LCA Programme

- Core Team to facilitate the coordination and planning of LCA Programme. This will include Programme Coordinator, Guidance Department, HSCL, SEN Department and Year Head of 3rd 5th and 6th year

- A 2-year programme framework which was available at time of inspection will be included in LCA Programme folder

- All subject plans will be included in LCA Planning Folder from September 2011

- Summative Assessment for Year 1 will commence May 2011

- All Key Assignments will be retained for two years