Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
REPORT

Coláiste Naomh Mhuire
Naas, Co. Kildare
Roll Number: 617301

Date of inspection: 12 October 2010
EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE VOCATIONAL PROGRAMME (LCVP)

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) in Coláiste Naomh Mhuire. 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 programme co-ordinator and the core team following the evaluation. 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

The LCVP is well established in Coláiste Naomh Mhuire, having been on the curriculum for more than ten years, and is a significant component of the senior cycle provision. There are three class groups in each of fifth and sixth year and base classes are based on the LCVP groups, thus giving these students a specific identity as LCVP students. Senior school management is very supportive of the programme and this is reflected in the timetabling arrangements that are in place, the provision of resources and in the allocation of teachers to the programme. Fifth year students are allocated three class periods each week, two for link module lessons, including career guidance time, and one for information and communication technology (ICT) class. Sixth year students are also provided with three class periods each week, two for link module lessons and one for Career Guidance. These periods are well spread out through the school week and are arranged to facilitate the required extended class time sometimes required to complete LCVP-related activities.

Implementing and managing the LCVP is the responsibility of a co-ordinator and a team of seven teachers. Members of this team have a wide range of expertise and experience and include teachers of business subjects, Geography, Mathematics and Home Economics and the school’s two career guidance counsellors, all of whom take link module classes. A teacher of German also contributes to the running of the programme. The members of this team have all undergone relevant professional development and good contacts are maintained with the appropriate support services. A very positive working relationship exists amongst the team members and their work is characterised by a spirit of co-operation and collaboration. The co-ordinator and core team are motivated, enthusiastic and committed to implementing the programme to the highest standards.

Teachers generally are aware of the LCVP and are cognisant of the LCVP students in their classrooms. They have been supportive of LCVP events and have contributed to their smooth running. The co-ordinator presented an introduction to the LCVP at a recent staff meeting and used the opportunity to emphasise the cross-curricular nature of the programme. However, there is
some scope to further enhance the implementation of the LCVP as an integrated cross-curricular programme.

It is recommended that an LCVP-specific notice board be used in the staffroom to announce upcoming LCVP events. The LCVP team should explore and document, with all subject departments, the links between their subjects and the link modules curriculum. Planning for the programme can then be extended to include concrete steps to implement the identified cross-curricular links, for example by selecting appropriate enterprise and other activities, and subject teachers can be encouraged to highlight these elements of their subjects with students at appropriate stages during the year.

1.2 Resources

The additional staffing resources accruing to the school, on the basis of the number of students following the programme, are deployed specifically to support LCVP students with the result that there are two teachers in the classroom for all link module lessons. Thus, team teaching is the predominant model of classroom interaction.

The provision of career guidance for LCVP students is integrated into the overall framework of LCVP provision. The formal timetabled involvement of the guidance department is an example of good practice, and emphasises the vocational nature of the programme in addition to contributing the specific expertise of the guidance counsellors. In this manner, focused guidance support for LCVP students is provided, for example, when students prepare curricula vitae (CVs), carry out career investigations and participate in work placements, at appropriate stages during the course of the school year. Appropriate preparation for further education and third-level applications is also co-ordinated in an integrated manner with the running of the LCVP.

LCVP-related funding is provided by management as required, at the request of the co-ordinator and in consultation with the LCVP team. Students are asked to contribute a small once-off fee upon initial enrolment in the LCVP and this covers the cost of providing all extra resources and necessary travel for the full extent of their participation in the programme.

The school’s ICT infrastructure has undergone sustained development in recent times and a second computer room has recently been commissioned. This resource facilitates extensive access for LCVP students to the ICT resources necessary for them to participate fully in the programme and avail of its benefits. A number of useful charts and information notices have been placed on the walls of the computer room. Although the information on the charts is valuable and informative, much of it is inaccessible to students due to the layout of the room and the size of the writing. The accessibility of this material should be improved and such material should also be displayed in the classrooms in which link module classes are taught. The inclusion of some student-prepared material would serve as a further encouragement to students.

1.3 Student selection and support

Discussion with students suggests that there is a good level of awareness of the LCVP and of the benefits of the programme, amongst students, prior to their enrolling in the programme. Students and their parents are given timely and accurate information regarding available senior cycle programmes and subject options. Students are well supported in making informed programme and subject choices. An information evening is held for parents of third-year and Transition Year (TY) students when a detailed presentation on the LCVP is made and an appropriate information brochure is distributed. The option to follow the LCVP is open to all students who are taking the
required combination of subjects on entering fifth year. Students with the appropriate subject groupings are encouraged to enrol in the LCVP and, while some qualified students choose not to follow the programme, it is evident that a number of students are choosing their subjects with the deliberate intention of qualifying to follow the LCVP and availing of the benefits it offers.

Learning support, when provided to LCVP students, is not LCVP specific, but student specific and is based on students’ individual learning needs. 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.

1.4 Home-school links

Parent-teacher meetings are used in the usual manner to inform parents of students’ progress and additional contact is as regular and frequent as required. Parents are contacted by letter to inform them of specific LCVP-related events and activities, for example, when making arrangements for work placements and visits out of school. Parents are welcome to contact the school to meet with individual teachers and are contacted individually if necessary.

Coláiste Naomh Mhuire 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 compiled a very comprehensive LCVP folder which is indicative of a high level of organization, hard work and thorough reflection regarding the implementation of the programme. Effective use has been made of available ICT resources in carrying out this work. The folder includes an appropriate plan, following the format of the School Development Planning Initiative template, which lists the aims and objectives of the programme and contains information on the running of the LCVP, effective teaching methodologies and a detailed term-by-term schedule for the timing of the various activities and the delivery of the link modules course content for the two years of the programme. A range of resources and assessment materials are also included in the folder along with details of the German ab-initio module, provided for students who are not studying a modern European language to Leaving Certificate level. Records of work placements are also maintained.

The LCVP team meets formally each term and informal meetings are held as necessary. It is very encouraging that pedagogical issues are discussed at meetings in addition to ongoing arrangements for managing the various activities that are in train at any particular time. The members of the team are commended for their hard work and their commitment to the further development of the LCVP in the college. In addition, it is evident from the records of team meetings that reflection and review are part of the ongoing interaction between LCVP team members and that the outcomes of such team activities feed back into the planning process, to the ultimate benefit of students. In order to enhance the review process, it is recommended that clear and objective
success criteria and specific procedures be developed and that the views of all relevant parties, including parents and students, should be sought and included.

2.2 Coordination

The quality of programme co-ordination is very good and the programme is very well structured and organized. The co-ordinator liaises extensively with school management, the LCVP team and with teaching staff in general. Appropriate 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 LCVP co-ordinator holds the post of programme co-ordinator, under the terms of circular ppt17/02, and also has responsibility for the school’s TY programme. An appropriate time allocation has been provided to the co-ordinator to carry out relevant duties.

LCVP co-ordination involves a broad range of duties and activities including promoting the programme, organising student and parent information sessions, communication with management, staff, parents and external bodies, organising work placements and visits into and out of the school, with the assistance of the LCVP team, keeping records and delivering elements of the programme in class. These duties are carried out effectively and the co-ordinator works hard to ensure the ongoing successful implementation of the programme.

Students following the school’s TY programme take part in a work placement scheme as part of their studies. However, there is no follow through from this scheme into the LCVP. It is recommended that, for those students who have completed the TY, a greater degree of linkage and follow up should be considered in relation to work placements and that an overall, coherent approach is implemented in order to maximize the value of these activities.

2.3 Curriculum

Students new to the LCVP undergo a short induction process at the beginning of the school year following which a broad and balanced programme of activities and learning opportunities is provided. As well as offering students opportunities for teamwork and hands-on experience, these activities are the basis of the various reports and documents for the students’ portfolios and students are encouraged to note links between their coursework activities and their chosen Leaving Certificate subjects. Activities include planning for and managing the visits of guest speakers to the classroom and visiting local enterprises. In both cases, a number of visits are arranged thus providing students with a broad range of experiences. Appropriate planning documents or reports are prepared by students in relation to all such activities and they therefore have a choice of documents to include in their portfolios. This is very good practice. Students also participate in a variety of enterprise activities. When planning possible enterprise activities, the LCVP co-ordinator is encouraged to consider activities which offer opportunities to combine input from the range of subjects that the LCVP students are studying. In addition, students complete the My Own Place module.

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. Good provision is made for students to develop their ICT skills throughout the programme and access to the school’s computer rooms, for research and for the preparation of portfolios, is available as required. Due to the coherent approach implemented in the school, theory and practice are well
integrated so that, in carrying out activities leading to the preparation of the portfolio items, students also cover much of the theoretical content of the course.

Work placement is an integral component of the programme and takes place for three days, in February, for all LCVP students. Students are well prepared in advance and they are facilitated to find their own work placements, with assistance from the school if necessary. All students are provided with copies of an excellent work placement booklet which includes templates of all necessary correspondence documents, guidelines for achieving a successful placement and information on the preparation of the work placement diary. While contact is maintained with employers by telephone during the work placement, 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.

Satisfactory arrangements for an appropriate language module, as required by the syllabus, are in place for those students who are not taking a modern European language, other than Irish and English, in the Leaving Certificate. These students attend one lesson per week in German, for the two years of the programme. It is recommended that the participation of students in these activities is recognized, through the award of a certificate of completion, following successful completion of the 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 reflected the objectives of the programme and was in keeping with planning documents. There was evidence of good short-term planning. 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

Consistently good quality teaching was evident in all of the lessons observed. Lesson content, in link module lessons, included preparatory work for the audio-visual section of the link module examination, a review of a case study, preparation for a visiting speaker, career investigation research and a study of voluntary and community organisations. An LCVP-related information technology (IT) lesson was also observed, during which students were given opportunities to improve on earlier drafts of their CVs and to learn new document management skills and procedures.

Lessons were well paced and well structured, with an appropriate balance between teacher-led and student-centred phases. Lesson objectives were presented to students at the outset of each lesson and were reviewed at the close of each lesson. A disciplined and focused atmosphere that supported an effective learning environment was apparent at all times and satisfactory progress was made in all lessons. Teachers’ approach to their work was professional and business-like and rapport with students was very good. It was evident that teachers had high expectations of their students and they supported them very well in their efforts to meet these expectations.
The most noteworthy aspect of the teaching activities observed was the presence of two teachers in all link module lessons. This facilitated the provision of very high level of individual attention to students and, consequently, a differentiated approach to teaching. Both teachers took the lead at various times during the lessons and both moved around the classrooms, at appropriate times, assessing students, assisting and supporting them, and encouraging them to perform to the best of their abilities. While it was clear that students gained from the presence of two teachers in the classroom, a clear rationale to underpin the team teaching and clear objectives regarding what the added value to students should be, were not evident. It is recommended that relevant in-service training be sought in order to maximise the benefits of this very good and resource-intensive provision, for both teachers and students.

The variety of classroom methodologies observed was appropriate to the ethos of the LCVP. Both individual and group tasks were assigned as appropriate. The methodologies observed included discussion, student writing and note taking, and the use of handouts and work sheets. The approach adopted by the teachers meant that they did not spend the majority of class time at the classroom board but were free to circulate and support individuals or small groups of students when the need arose. Continuity from previous lessons was good and new information was well linked to prior learning. Questioning of students was used effectively to assess levels of knowledge and understanding 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. There was an appropriate emphasis on the use of subject-specific language and the level of teacher-student interaction was good. Students responded to their teachers’ encouragement 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.

3.3 Assessment

Students successfully carried out the different tasks assigned to them during the lessons observed. Good quality learning was evident from their level of engagement with learning activities, the high standard of the work they had completed, the questions they asked and the quality of their answers when questioned during class. Student performance in the state examinations is of a high standard and it is commendable that the co-ordinator carries out an annual analysis of these results in order to ensure that such high standards are maintained.

Formative assessment of students is carried out on an ongoing basis by questioning them in class, through correction of homework and through teacher movement and observation of students during class, as noted by the inspector. Students’ written work and the draft portfolio items that they prepare are well monitored and good quality feedback is 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. Good use was made of past examination papers in preparing students for their link modules examination and, in order to set targets for students’ attainment and to encourage reflection and self evaluation, they are provided with copies of the LCVP portfolio marking scheme and of the specific learning outcomes of the link modules.

Formal assessment of students’ progress in the link modules is by means of Christmas and summer examinations in fifth year and by means of progress monitoring and mock examinations, in the
second term, for sixth-year students. A progress report, including assessment results, is sent to students’ homes following each formal assessment.

Students expressed a very positive attitude towards the LCVP and their participation in it during discussions with the inspector. They stated that participating in the programme affords them different experiences of learning, particularly in relation to work placement opportunities, assists them with career choices and gives them the opportunity to gain more points in the Leaving Certificate examination.

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 Coláiste Naomh Mhuire.
- The programme is managed and implemented by a dedicated and hard-working core team, the members of which have very good working relationships.
- The programme is well supported by school management as evidenced by the level of staffing allocated to the programme, the timetabling arrangements that are in place and the provision of resources.
- Good links are maintained with local voluntary and community enterprises and with local businesses.
- Extensive 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.
- Outcomes for students in the Leaving Certificate examination are very encouraging and reflective of the quality of teaching and learning taking place in the school.
- 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 explores and documents, with all subject departments, the links between their subjects and the link modules curriculum and that planning for the programme be extended to include concrete steps to implement the identified cross-curricular links.
- It is recommended that, for those students who have completed Transition Year, a greater degree of linkage and follow up should be considered in relation to work placements and that an approach is implemented which will maximize the value to them of these activities.
- It is recommended that, in so far as is possible, all workplaces are visited by school staff over the course of the work 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 recommended that relevant in-service training be sought in order to maximise the benefits of team teaching for both teachers and students.

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