EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme in Ennis 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 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 representatives of the core team following the evaluation. 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.

Ennis Community College operates within the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme. The LCA programme is an integral part of the school’s curricular response to meeting the broad educational needs of all its students. The LCA has been an important element of the senior cycle in the school since 1996.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The principal is hugely supportive of the programme and has detailed knowledge and understanding of its operation and its place in the context of the whole school. Clear and effective leadership is provided by the principal regarding the programme and its implementation. The very positive impact of the programme in reaching DEIS targets for attendance and retention is fully acknowledged.

LCA is treated with equity among the curricular programmes in the school. Students of the programme are fully acknowledged in all aspects of the life of the school, they are afforded equal opportunities and they are honoured in the annual awards ceremony. The first-year LCA class took the award for the best class in the school in last year’s awards. The programme is publicised appropriately and consistently with other programmes. The profile of the programme in the school is positive among teachers and students. Students expressed satisfaction that the programme was available to them in the school and that they did not have to change schools to access it when entering senior cycle.

Teachers new to the programme are provided with a structured induction programme, led by the programme co-ordinator, at the beginning of each year. Where a teacher begins to teach LCA for the first time in the course of the year, induction is also provided on a one-to-one basis.

1.2 Resources

Teachers are assigned to teach elements of the programme appropriate to their qualifications and interests. The various elements of the programme are, in general, appropriately timetabled. All LCA students engage in work experience for the full day on Friday. The timetabling of the
remaining courses in the other four days is greatly facilitated by the provision of ten lesson periods on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, while Wednesday has nine periods. A number of adjustments of time allocation are recommended, however. The designation of elective modules in Arts Education, Leisure and Recreation and Information and Communications Technology should be examined to ensure that the advised time allocation for the mandatory courses in each case is appropriately provided. Additional time should then be allocated for completion of the elective modules. Arts Education should be provided in each of the four modules rather than in sessions one and two alone. An allocation of time for task preparation, often referred to as task tutorial time, should be considered. The LCA support service, available at http://lca.slss.ie/, advises the timetabling of one period per week in sessions one and two, and two periods per week in sessions three and four for this purpose.

Students are provided with access to computer-room facilities for their study of ICT and for the completion of work including key assignments and tasks. When the LCA classes are not assigned to the computer room, teachers arrange for access as needed and this is successful for whole-class use of computer resources. Students do not have access to ICT in the general classroom. The availability of a small number of internet-connected computers in the classroom would facilitate easy access by students to information in the course of lessons. The provision of such within current resources should be considered.

The presence of computers in the classroom would, with the addition of a data projector, also facilitate the use of ICT in teaching. This is, on the evidence of ICT use in the lessons observed in the course of the evaluation, an area for further development. ICT is, however, used effectively in the organisation of the programme.

Teachers, particularly those new to the programme, are facilitated with opportunities to engage in continuing professional development (CPD). Notification of upcoming sessions is provided by the co-ordinator. Some experienced teachers stated that more on-going CPD should be made available to them. It was felt that the focus was entirely on teachers new to the programme but that the need for CPD continued even for the most successful and experienced teachers. It is urged that the possibility of providing formal de-briefing sessions be examined at which teachers returning from LCA-specific CPD could discuss the content of the course with the whole LCA team. The skills and knowledge of the experienced and dedicated LCA team can, in this way, be shared and reflected upon leading to further enhancement of the programme.

1.3 Student selection and support

Great care is exercised in the identification of students for whom LCA is the most suitable programme choice. Liaison with staff members who know the students well, including the guidance counsellor, year head, resource team and the home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator together with the school-completion project (SCP) team, identifies students who are then interviewed with their parents. The programme details are presented and its suitability for the student is explained. While the choice remains with the students and parents, the advice is usually accepted. In some cases the student approaches the co-ordinator or the guidance counsellor to make their interest in the programme known before they have been contacted. Acceptance in the LCA programme is valued by the students. Students are provided with appropriate guidance with regard to their choice of programme. The process of student selection and support is very effective.

Good provision is made to meet the additional educational needs of students in the LCA programme. This is done in an efficient, organised and integrated manner. Learning support and
resource teaching are often provided in small-group settings by the three members of the special educational needs department. The special educational needs co-ordinator maintains close contact with the three special needs assistants who work with LCA students. The additional educational needs of all students, including students of LCA, are discussed and reviewed at weekly meetings of the resource and special educational needs team. This facilitates very effective provision for the students. Classroom-support plans are compiled by the special educational needs co-ordinator in collaboration with teachers. Copies of these plans are provided for each teacher. This is good planning practice. Learning support and resource teaching is, when appropriate, provided during time allocated to Gaeilge Chumarsáideach and French when the students concerned have been formally exempted from the study of these subjects. Where students are not exempted, or where the allocation of resource-teaching hours exceeds the time allocated to Gaeilge Chumarsáideach and French, a range of other strategies is adopted to provide for the students’ allocated entitlements. The use of the task tutorial time, referred to earlier in this report, should be considered when arranging for resource teaching under these circumstances. The use of team teaching should be considered in this context, where appropriate.

It is likely that the FOLAN project, begun in the current year as an intervention to address literacy and numeracy among selected first-year JCSP students, will also provide relevant experience for the staff involved in enhancing provision for literacy and numeracy support in LCA. The school’s involvement in the Learning School Project 2, a project launched by the Clare Education Centre, looks to extend the advances in the FOLAN project throughout the whole school, including LCA. The continuity of support integral to this approach is in line with good planning.

There is an effective process of student induction in place at the beginning of session one which is facilitated by the programme co-ordinator. This induction takes place over two days and is based on appropriate learning materials.

1.4 Home-school links

Parental awareness of LCA is effectively supported in a variety of ways. The school website includes appropriately detailed information on the aims, structure and implementation of the programme. LCA has parity with other senior-cycle programmes and is given equal prominence at general information sessions for parents. The involvement of parents is assured at all stages of the selection process.

Parents are kept informed of students’ progress by means of regular contact between the school and home, in line with good practice. The formal aspect of this contact includes the sending home of session results from the State Examinations Commission, school reports at Christmas and in summer, and the setting and reporting of mock examinations. Under the guidance of the programme co-ordinator, it has become practice to invite parents in when students have done particularly well. This means of providing positive feedback is very good and it has been welcomed by parents.

Parents are informed if students are in danger of not gaining credits due to poor attendance or non-completion of key assignments, and a number of initiatives introduced under the DEIS programme also keep parents appraised of students’ progress. These initiatives include the School Completion Programme, which actively monitors and reacts to absenteeism and truancy on a daily basis, and the HSCL co-ordinator who maintains constant contact with the home and visits as required.
2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The LCA plan is, in the main, appropriate, current, comprehensive and coherent. It includes whole-school policies and is itself an integral part of the school plan. The LCA plan includes a detailed programme for each of the four sessions through fifth year and sixth year. It is recommended, to further ensure the responsiveness of the plan, that a separate programme schedule be provided for each cohort of students based on the curriculum framework. Each programme schedule, which should be dated and cover the four sessions, will provide for the flexibility that is needed as changes are made to the programme over time.

Individual course plans are linked to the existing LCA plan. These course plans provide descriptions of the course content in each case. This is good planning practice. In some cases the course plans deal with the delivery of the content in terms of the teaching methodologies and strategies to be used, and when these are to be deployed. This very good planning practice should be applied to the development of each of the course plans. The resulting, more complete course plans, should be provided in digital form by each of the course teachers for inclusion in the programme plan.

There is a core LCA team in place that is suitably representative of the larger LCA team including guidance, special educational needs, home-school-community liaison and pastoral care personnel. Adding a representative of senior management to this team should be considered. The core team meets regularly. Records of the core-team meetings are stored in the LCA plan folder. This is good recording practice that supports continuity in planning. The records show that the core team is effective in monitoring and evaluating the programme.

Cross-curricular elements of the programme are effectively planned for and implemented. Courses and modules are correctly sequenced to provide for the necessary cross-curricular links. Effective cross-curricular work by students and the commitment of the programme team to the key LCA principle of providing integration across the curriculum were evident in the course of the evaluation.

The records of annual reviews of the structure, content and implementation of the programme show that these reviews are collaborative and have led to further improvement of the programme. Among the changes to emerge from the review process, and to be successfully implemented recently, is the restructuring and standardisation of procedures for the storage of students’ class work in all courses. The quality and organisation of work had earlier been identified by the LCA team as a cause of some concern. An intervention aimed at making students more responsible and accountable for their work within a clear structure has led to definite improvement in its quality, presentation and storage. Another area identified for further improvement through the annual review process was the more formal involvement of all the interested parties, parents, students, teachers and the whole staff, in the review process itself. This initiative is commended and it is to be expected that such an approach, particularly when inputs are comparable and are consistently recorded over a number of years, will form a strong evidence base for further well-founded improvement of the programme.
2.2 Co-ordination

Very effective formal programme co-ordination structures are in place. These structures are working very well and provide a vibrant centre around which the coherent implementation of the programme’s aims is facilitated. The programme co-ordinator maintains very good communications with school management and students, in addition to maintaining the cohesiveness of the programme team. The co-ordinator is in daily contact with all the students, being timetabled to teach two courses to each class.

There are a number of aspects of the LCA programme in the school that are in need of further development which, together with the day-to-day co-ordination duties, entail a substantial allocation of the co-ordinator’s time.

2.3 Curriculum

The LCA curriculum in the school is suitable to the needs, interests and aspirations of the students. It is suitably broad and balanced. While the vocational specialisms being provided, Graphics and Construction Studies and Hotel Catering and Tourism, meet the needs, interests and abilities of the present students, it is very positive that, given the changing nature of the employment market, that the LCA team and senior school management review this provision annually. The possibility of introducing elective modules of other courses as a step towards change, in response to students’ preferences, should be kept in mind.

There is an appropriate awareness in the school, at management level and among the core team, of the importance of avoiding gender stereotyping when making decisions regarding the curriculum. The present curriculum, including the vocational specialisms, has been considered in the context of gender equality in line with good gender-mainstreaming principles and is suitably inclusive.

Work experience is provided for one day per week in each of the four sessions. Time is allocated weekly for preparation and de-briefing of students with regard to their experiences. This is effective timetabling practice and helps to ensure that students derive maximum benefit from their work experience. Contact is maintained with the employers who host the students and detailed records are kept.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

The longer-term planning of the teachers, as seen in the course plans and as implemented in the lessons observed, is consistent with the stated objectives of the programme plan. The implementation of the programme is further supported by effective lesson planning and preparation, which in general resulted in coherently planned and executed lessons that reflected the approaches presented in the key principles on which the LCA programme is founded. It is recommended that greater emphasis be placed on the preparation of suitable ICT resources in courses where these are not already extensively used. Further differentiation and enrichment of teaching and learning strategies, including greater use of group work and learning by discovery in some instances, should also be targeted in planning and preparation.

There is very effective liaison between the special educational needs staff and the LCA team. This contact and collaboration is often used to inform detailed planning, at the level of course plans and
lesson planning, for meeting the additional educational needs of students within lessons. This planning, in seeking to provide and ensure consistency in the educational experience of students in lessons across all courses, represents good practice.

3.2 Learning and teaching

The lessons observed were, in general, well structured and suitably paced and, in some cases, were optimal in this regard. A cookery lesson in the Hotel Catering and Tourism specialism provided a multi-layered experience for the students, dealing with practical-skills development in a context that also covered cultural and language diversity as well as the social, personal and basic-skills development of the students. The introduction of a Chinese student from another class in the school, to present a number of relevant terms in his mother tongue and help the students to pronounce them, was innovative and effective on a number of levels.

While a suitably wide range of teaching methodologies was observed in use in most lessons, in a few instances opportunities were not taken to differentiate approaches and to provide greater diversity of experience and involvement for students. The further sharing of best practice among team members in this regard, and the adoption of common approaches to lesson development, should be used to bring about further consistency in the quality of the students’ educational experiences.

While the degree to which learning took place varied from lesson to lesson, all students engaged fully with the material being covered and this provided a good sense that the students were learning and growing in understanding. This was evident in the answers and responses of students to their teachers’ questions and to the enquiries of the inspector. Students also occasionally asked pertinent questions, showing their engagement and appreciation of concepts and information encountered. The students’ responses were widely used to develop the lessons and, where this was most prominent, students displayed the greatest levels of involvement and motivation.

The students’ attitudes to learning were positive. When interviewed, students were ambitious with regard to attaining successful outcomes in the programme. The importance of educational success for their further advancement was cited as a major motivator. The LCA team harnesses this motivation effectively to encourage learning.

Teachers’ expectations of the students were generally high, leading to their being expected to work independently, often in small groups. Occasionally, where lessons were more teacher-led, it was not clear that students were being challenged to an appropriate extent. The provision of appropriate challenge in all lessons should be addressed in the further development of the programme so that the very good practice observed in many instances can be shared and followed in all lessons.

Effective classroom management was evident in each of the lessons visited. The orderly distribution of students to designated work places, most notably in the practical lessons observed, facilitated effective learning and organisation of work. The atmosphere in lessons was calm and friendly. Discipline, maintained by sensitive, low-key intervention by the teacher when required, was an integral part of classroom life and encouraged maturity and self-assurance among the students in line with the underlying principles of LCA.
3.3 Assessment

Students’ work is regularly assessed both formally and informally in the school. The formal assessment follows the requirements of the programme. Students complete key assignments in the modules of each course in line with the provisions of the module descriptor. The system of recording and storing evidence of completion of key assignment is effective. At completion of a module, the evidence is passed to the co-ordinator for filing together with the required documentation. However, it is suggested, to further improve the system of key-assignment storage, that evidence of completion of key assignments be organised by module rather than by student. This has the advantage of simplifying the process of passing the evidence to the co-ordinator. The system should be standardised for all courses. It may be helpful for students to provide photographic evidence of completed artefacts, such as assignments in Art Studies, Graphics and Construction Studies and Hotel Catering and Tourism. The use of the digital camera, or the camera phone, for this purpose also provides an opportunity for students to use the skills developed in ICT.

Students’ tasks are completed under the guidance of the assigned teachers and are presented for assessment in line with the requirements of the programme. Students sit LCA certificate examinations, including orals, practical performance and written examinations at the end of session two and session four, as appropriate.

In addition to the foregoing, formal assessment of students’ work and progress, and various assessment for learning techniques are employed in class to assess and encourage further progress. This was observed in all lessons in the course of the evaluation, most regularly by means of verbal feedback given to students in the course of lessons and as teachers moved among students who were busy completing work assigned in class. Affirmative written comments were observed on students’ work in a number of lessons and this is commended as a very effective mode of assessment. This good practice should be followed as often as possible.

Appropriate emphasis is placed on the encouragement and recording of students’ attendance in line with LCA principles and good practice. Teachers keep individual records of attendance in addition to the efficient centralised attendance system.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The LCA programme in the school benefits from clear and effective leadership, and equity of treatment among the other programmes.
- Great care is exercised in the identification of students for whom LCA is the most suitable programme choice and good provision is made to meet the additional educational needs of these students.
- The LCA plan is, in the main, appropriate, current, comprehensive and coherent.
- The core team is effective, and collaborative reviews have led to further improvement of the programme.
- Very effective formal programme co-ordination structures are in place.
- The structure and presentation of lessons are generally good and are optimal on occasion.
• Teachers follow the underlying principles of LCA to encourage maturity and self assurance among the students.

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

• Time allocation for elective modules in Arts Education, Leisure and Recreation and Information and Communications Technology should be examined.
• The provision of a small number of internet-connected computers in the classroom should be considered within current resources while the use of ICT in teaching is an area for further development.
• Further differentiation and enrichment of teaching and learning strategies, including ICT use, should be targeted in planning and preparation.
• Appropriate challenge for students should be provided in all lessons.
• The system of key-assignment recording and storage should be standardised for all courses.