An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Applied
REPORT

Scariff Community College
County Clare
Roll Number: 70900I

Date of inspection: 5 May 2011
EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the LCA in Scariff Community College. It presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for the further development of the programme in the school. During the evaluation, the inspector held meetings with the school principal, a core group of teachers and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector liaised extensively with the programme coordinator and visited classrooms to observe teaching and learning. The inspector provided oral feedback to teachers on lessons observed. The inspector also examined students’ work and reviewed relevant documentation pertaining to the programme, as well as teachers’ written preparation. The outcomes of the evaluation were discussed with the school principal, the deputy principal, the programme coordinator 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.

Scariff Community College provides second-level education in a coeducational context for Scariff and adjacent areas of East Clare. The school is the sole provider of second-level education in the locality and it caters inclusively for the community. A very good range of curricular programmes is offered and LCA has been in the school since 2003. The school enrolment is 310.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The principal has a clear understanding of the programme, its aims and implementation and affirms its importance for those students for whom it is the most suitable choice in senior cycle. School management is committed to the continued provision of LCA and provides effective leadership regarding its implementation.

A low level of student demand has meant that the option of beginning LCA has only been provided on alternate years. Students reaching senior cycle in years when LCA is not being provided are encouraged to follow the Transition Year (TY) programme to begin LCA in the following year. However, an examination of the number of students who begin LCA having completed TY indicates that this is much lower than the number who avail of LCA directly following Junior Certificate, in years when this option is provided. One of the factors influencing this lower uptake in alternate years is oversubscription to TY, which limits the places available for students who wish to progress to LCA in the following year. The school should investigate the practicability of providing entry to LCA in each year or, alternatively, provide ample places in TY to facilitate students waiting to enter the programme.

LCA has a very positive profile in the school. It is perceived by staff and students to be an integral part of senior cycle. The work of LCA students is given full recognition. The programme is treated equitably with LCA students playing a full part in all aspects of the life of the school.

The LCA team has a clear awareness of the distinctive aims and teaching approaches of the programme. Teachers new to LCA are introduced to these aims and approaches by the programme coordinator and the other experienced team members. This supports team cohesiveness. Building on this good practice, a more formal approach to the induction of teachers new to LCA is
suggested to be included in the programme plan with a focus in particular on the teaching methodologies found to be most effective in the delivery of the programme.

1.2 Resources

Teachers are assigned appropriately to teach the programme, on the basis of qualifications and interests. The timetable is aligned with the requirements of the programme and is appropriately balanced, in line with the advice of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). Adequate time is generally allocated to each course. However, it is recommended that the Social Education course be provided with five periods weekly in place of the present four.

It was observed that the large proportion of students with exemptions from the study of Gaeilge Chumarsáideach led to a situation in an Irish lesson where a significant majority of students in the classroom were not engaged in the lesson. This undermined the learning environment and militated against a positive outcome for students taking the course. It is recommended, where the number of students availing of exemptions from these courses warrants it, that the provision of a separate learning space be urgently considered to facilitate the effective teaching of Gaeilge Chumarsáideach and Modern Languages.

The overhead projector (OHP) was used creatively, and very effectively, in two of the lessons when students were directly involved in displaying information on the screen. In a Vocational Preparation and Guidance lesson, students wrote on the transparency film directly, listing in turn organisations in which they were involved. This formed an early part of a class investigation of the opportunities for community involvement in Scariff. In an Agriculture/Horticulture lesson, students laid the appropriate prepared strips of transparency film on the screen, linking farm animal exports and their markets. While there was some limited evidence of the use of information and communication technology (ICT) for teaching, as in a Mathematical Applications lesson when an example of a graph was shown through the data projector, generally the use of ICT in lessons was very low. It is recommended that further use be made of ICT in lessons, and that its integration into active learning experiences for students be fully explored and implemented. Modification of very successful OHP teaching materials for use in the ICT environment may make these even more effective. The possibility of providing a small number of computers in the classroom for students’ use should also be considered, within the present resources of the school.

Teachers are encouraged and facilitated, by the programme coordinator and school management, to engage in appropriate continuing professional development (CPD), particularly teachers new to the programme. This good staff-development practice informs teachers of relevant changes and provides for sharing of ideas and resources. Attendance and involvement of teachers in CPD is recorded in the LCA plan. It is urged that the programme team, and school management, consider including some whole-staff CPD regarding LCA in staff-development planning. In-school CPD provides an opportunity for the benefits derived from PDST, and other, professional development sessions to be shared and discussed in a whole-school context. The considerable skills, experience and accumulated knowledge of the LCA team should be seen as a resource in providing for such whole-staff development.

1.3 Student selection and support

An appropriate process of programme selection and student support is well integrated with student care. Students and their parents begin to be introduced to LCA, together with the other programmes in the school, from their initial contact, prior to entrance. The aims, rationale and organisation of the programme begin to be presented at this stage. Students for whom the
programme is likely to be the most suitable choice for senior cycle are encouraged to consider it as the opportunity arises through junior cycle. The principal, LCA coordinator, special educational needs coordinator and guidance counsellor are aware of the likely participation rates, and of the individual students likely to participate in the programme in each year.

The guidance and support provided for students and their parents is good and includes meetings for third-year students at which the aims and implementation of the programme are described and clarified. Occasionally, parents of other students also attend these sessions and, for instance, a student misplaced in the established Leaving Certificate in fifth year may begin LCA with the following cohort. This flexibility in the provision of support and information is appropriate.

There are very good supports in LCA for students with additional educational needs. These supports are provided as part of an integrated, whole-school approach to meeting students’ needs. The LCA coordinator and the coordinator of special educational needs collaborate very effectively regarding advice to individual students on their choice of programme and also regarding provision for meeting additional educational needs of students. Both coordinators meet the LCA team concerning suitable strategies for meeting the individual needs of the students. The special educational needs coordinator continues to monitor the progress of students in LCA and is involved in providing focused CPD for teachers, including teachers of LCA.

1.4 Home-school links

Home-school links are maintained effectively. The nature and purpose of the programme are further clarified incrementally, as appropriate, through junior cycle. Involvement of parents in the process of programme selection is effective, supported by information evenings, the school prospectus and newsletters.

More formal links are established with selected parents regarding the programme as they are invited to meetings to assess individual students’ suitability for LCA. These links are successfully maintained through the two years of the programme by means of parent-teacher meetings, text messaging, newsletters, written correspondence and by telephone.

Parents receive meaningful feedback on students’ progress by means of the established communication links and more formally by comment-based reports, issued by the school at Christmas, in addition to the issue of statements of credits at the end of each session. Where students are at risk of not being awarded credits, due to poor attendance or failure to complete assignments, these students and their parents are issued with timely warnings.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

Formal planning for the programme has made considerable progress. There is a current written LCA plan that includes relevant outlines of policy regarding aspects of the programme organisation, including admission guidelines and the process of student selection, work experience and practice with regard to meeting students’ special educational needs. The plan includes individual subject plans for each of the courses. These plans generally contain short programmes of work which closely follow the contents of the module descriptors.
It is recommended that the LCA plan be further developed to become more comprehensive and to include a complete, well defined, two-year programme for each cohort of students. The plan should detail, specifically, the cross-curricular aspects of the individual modules and indicate how and when these aspects are to be completed with reference to the individual course plans. The course plans should be further developed by the teachers of the respective courses on a common template. Each plan should include more detail regarding the approaches to be taken to teaching and learning, linking specific teaching methodologies and approaches to specific content where this is possible. The course plans should then be inserted into the LCA plan.

Routine planning for the programme is thorough and very effective. There is an active and committed core team in place which meets regularly, in the region of five times per year formally, to plan and monitor implementation and to evaluate success. In addition to these meetings, the entire programme team meets about three times per year. The initial meeting is used to review the incoming students, to agree the assignment of student tasks and to support the teachers in taking ownership of the programme. At mid-year, a meeting is used to review progress and deal with any emerging concerns. An end-of-year meeting is used to review and evaluates the programme.

For added improvement of the review process, it should be further formalised to include inputs by a full range of interested parties, including parents and students. Consistent templates for end-of-year reviews should be used to provide information that is easily compared and thus more useful in planning for ongoing improvement of the programme.

2.2 Coordination

The coordination of LCA is formally and appropriately structured. The various aspects of the programme, including examinations and assessment, the return of data to the State Examinations Commission, work experience and student tasks, are coordinated very effectively. The LCA coordinator also provides very good leadership of the programme team while communicating very effectively with school management and the LCA students. The coordinator also has appropriate timetabled contact with the LCA class.

In the case of the recording and storage of evidence of completion of key assignments, a further degree of formality should be invoked. The process of recording and storage should be standardised for all courses and the evidence of completion should be passed to the coordinator for storage in a central location on completion of the respective module.

2.3 Curriculum

The programme, as it is implemented in the school, is consistent with the relevant guidelines and programme statement of the Department of Education and Skills. The curriculum is broad and balanced and meets the needs, interests and abilities of the students, which are prioritised in its design. The two vocational specialisms on the curriculum at the time of the evaluation are Engineering and Agriculture/Horticulture. The four elective modules on the curriculum comprise two modules from both Hotel Catering and Tourism and Office Administration and Customer Care. Vocational specialisms and elective modules are chosen, where possible, to suit the needs, interests and abilities of each group of students. French is the Modern European Language studied.
3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

Short-term planning for the delivery of the courses was of a good standard. Teachers followed programmes of work that were consistent with the relevant course descriptors. Planning for individual lessons was generally of a good standard. The standard of preparedness of teachers ensured that lessons were coherent and logical when presenting and investigating material. Lesson content was aligned with the stated programmes of work. In a small number of lessons, the need for more careful planning for the use of appropriate teaching resources was identified and a greater focus should be placed on planning for the use of ICT in all lessons.

Planning for the additional educational needs of students in LCA forms an integral part of lesson planning and there is very close liaison between the teachers of the programme and the learning support and resource team in this regard.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Lessons were well structured and paced and were at a level appropriate to the students’ abilities and capacity for challenge. The purpose of the lessons was clear from the outset, often overtly stated and recorded on the whiteboard or blackboard. It is urged that this good practice, with regard to preparing students for the learning about to take place, be developed further by agreeing definite learning goals with the students at the beginning of the lesson. These learning goals might then be revisited at the end of the lesson to affirm and reinforce the learning that has taken place.

A range of suitable teaching methodologies was observed. In many lessons this range was broad and supported an appropriate variety of learning styles. In some instances, however, there was a need for further differentiation and specifically a need for the inclusion of further group-based activities. The deployment of carefully structured activities involving students in pairs or small groups should be increased to facilitate more collaborative involvement.

The development of students’ literacy skills formed an appreciable element of lessons. Students’ notebooks and keyword lists were used in some lessons while care was taken in all lessons to ensure students’ understanding of terminology and the subject-related language being used. It is urged that the LCA teachers share their good practice regarding the development of the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, detailing and formalising common approaches and strategies that should then be included in the programme plan.

A good level of learning was displayed by students in almost all lessons. This learning was observed in students’ interactions with the teachers and in their responses to questioning, including informal questioning by the inspector. Students demonstrated significant skills and competencies in the completion and recording of their work. Teachers displayed appropriately high expectations of students who in turn showed positive attitudes to learning and engaged well with the activities being undertaken in the lessons.

Classroom communication was mutually respectful, while suitably informal to allow the development of a very effective learning environment. Classroom management was very successful in all lessons and, very occasionally, where correction was needed this was provided sensitively and unobtrusively. Clear routines and expectations had been established, most
obviously in practical lessons, and this facilitated the completion of work in an atmosphere of calm and order.

3.3 Assessment

In keeping with the structure of the LCA programme, students’ work is regularly assessed through the completion of key assignments and student tasks. Appropriately constructive feedback is provided, both formally and as an integral part of classroom activity.

Students’ attendance is systematically monitored and recorded in accordance with the requirements of the LCA programme and appropriate arrangements are in place for the tracking of the minimum ninety percent attendance needed for the award of module credits.

The coordinator maintains effective records of students’ progress, their completion of key assignments and the award of credits. The reporting of these data to the State Examinations Commission is completed in line with the requirements of the programme.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- LCA has a very positive profile in the school.
- The process of programme selection is well integrated with student care, and the guidance and support provided for students and their parents is very good.
- There are very good supports for LCA students with additional educational needs.
- The coordination of the programme is well structured and very effective.
- The interests and abilities of the students are prioritised in the design of a broad and balanced curriculum.
- In many lessons the range of teaching methodologies was broad and supported an appropriate variety of learning styles.
- A good level of learning was displayed by students in almost all lessons.

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

- The school should investigate the practicability of providing entry to LCA each year or, as an alternative, should provide ample places in TY to facilitate students waiting to enter LCA.
- The provision of a separate learning space should be considered urgently to facilitate the effective teaching of Gaeilge Chumarsáideach and Modern Languages when the number of students availing of exemptions from these courses warrants it.
- The LCA plan should be developed further to include a two-year programme for each cohort of students, suitably specific individual course plans and scheduling of the cross-curricular elements of modules and courses.
- The process of annual programme review should include inputs by a full range of interested parties, including parents and students.
- Recording and organisation of key assignments should be standardised for all courses with central storage of evidence of completion on conclusion of the respective modules.
Additional, carefully structured, active-learning opportunities, involving students working in pairs or in small groups, should be provided, where appropriate, to facilitate more collaborative learning.