EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme in Saint Kilian’s Community School, Bray. 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, the co-ordination team and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector 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 deputy principal following the evaluation.

Saint Kilian’s Community School is a co-educational school that caters for 491 students. The school is involved in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action planning. To cater for the diversity of students’ needs, the school provides the Junior Certificate, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), the established Leaving Certificate and the LCA programme. LCA has formed part of the school’s senior cycle curriculum since 1995. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix to this report.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

LCA is a well-established and vital component of the school’s curriculum. The continued provision of LCA for the school’s senior cycle students is viewed by senior management as essential in order to meet the needs of the student cohort. The daily operation of the programme is delegated to a co-ordinator and additional supporting staff including the special educational needs (SEN) co-ordinator, the learning support teacher and an administrative secretary. This practice has been successful and has allowed for a culture of distributed leadership to evolve in the planning, organisation and implementation of the programme. However, the current co-ordinator is acting in a voluntary caretaking capacity. Senior management should make every effort to formalise the position of co-ordinator to ensure the continued effective delivery of the programme.

The teaching staff are kept informed about the programme by way of occasional inputs from the LCA co-ordination team during staff meetings, the school’s LCA newsletter and the displays of students’ work and activities on the LCA notice board. The practice of LCA students publicising their achievements and experiences in this manner should be developed and the responsibility for these tasks possibly delegated to individuals or groups in each class group.

A strategy aimed at further integrating LCA students with their peers is being piloted among the current sixth-year group. This endeavour demonstrates the school’s willingness to review and develop its practices with a view to improving students’ experiences. Any decision to continue or discontinue this strategy should be based upon students’ experiences and consideration of any potential benefits that may accrue.
Induction for new teachers to the programme is mainly informal. At the commencement of each programme cycle, a resource pack is prepared including class lists, schemes of work, curricular framework documentation, credit award sheets and attendance recording sheets. This good practice provides new and experienced members of the LCA teaching team with an invaluable bank of resources. To further develop the current induction practices and supports, planning meetings should now begin to focus on collaborative skill development in the form of peer-delivered continuing professional development (CPD) seminars. Experienced LCA practitioners and those new to the programme should be encouraged to share their expertise with the entire LCA teaching team, particularly in areas such as active learning methodologies, co-operative learning and the effective use of information and communication technology (ICT) resources in LCA lessons.

1.2 Resources

In almost all instances, teachers are appropriately assigned to teach LCA. These allocations are based on their skill sets, interests, and experience within the programme. In the case of the guidance module of the Vocational Preparation and Guidance (VPG) course, non-qualified guidance teachers are currently assigned to deliver the module in both fifth and sixth year. This practice should be rectified as a matter of urgency.

Currently LCA students are regularly assigned to a base classroom. The further development of this room will facilitate students’ and teachers’ access to essential ICT resources. Significant research and planning should now take place in order to identify appropriate resources that will help to improve students’ learning experiences.

ICT is used very effectively in the organisation of the LCA programme. Good practices were observed in relation to the storage of pertinent documents and files in addition to students’ attendance, achievements and educational planning documentation. Students reported that they have appropriate access to ICT in order to complete their coursework and tasks.

To defray the costs of stationary and photocopying and to offset the cost of excursions and activities, students are asked to make a monetary contribution. It should be made clear to parents that a student’s enrolment in the programme is not dependent on making this contribution.

1.3 Student selection and support

Individual students whom the LCA team deem suitable for the programme are encouraged to apply for a position. Their selection is informed by the records and insights of the JCSP team, the care team, the learning support team and the relevant third-year subject teachers. All third-year students and their parents receive information relating to the programme during a senior cycle open evening. Interested students are then interviewed. However, during the meeting with the inspector some students expressed a degree of uncertainty regarding the options available to them upon entering senior cycle. While it is recognised that TY is an option for students wishing to enrol in LCA, it was reported that most tend to enter the programme directly from third year. To ensure that parents and students are fully aware of the options available to them upon entering senior cycle, the school’s guidance, TY and LCA teams should ensure that all students are fully briefed and encouraged to partake in the programme or programmes most suitable to their needs.

A number of very positive strategies are in place to include students who require additional educational support. The ongoing implementation of co-operative teaching methods and the targeted deployment of special educational needs assistants (SNA) are very positive aspects of the
educational supports currently in place in the school’s LCA programme. Management and staff are commended for their openness to alternative interventions of this kind. Individual education plans (IEP) have been developed and are utilised to identify strategies and targets for students in receipt of additional educational support. To build upon these positive interventions and to supplement the school’s DEIS action plan, practical supports and methodologies should be identified and promoted throughout the programme to foster the development of both literacy and numeracy skills among LCA students.

Student induction takes place at the beginning of fifth year. Sixth-year students are also included in some of these events particularly the team-building activities. Other activities include the explanation of LCA specific terminology and the various modes of assessment employed during each session. These good practices are commended.

1.4 Home-school links

Regular contact is maintained with parents through a variety of channels including correspondence, phone calls and scheduled meetings. These links help to ensure that parents are kept informed of students’ progress. In addition, the school’s LCA newsletter provides the school community with an informative publication that outlines regular events and school activities. Alternative approaches possibly incorporating ICT should also be explored as a more time efficient and economical method of disseminating information to parents, teachers and the wider community.

Efforts have been made to include parents in the various events held for and by the LCA students. A coffee morning organised and run by the students as part of a group task was reported to have been a successful endeavour that resulted in the majority of parents attending and maintaining ongoing links with the school. Other events that facilitate home-school links include the end-of-year graduation ceremony, parent-teacher meetings and the programme information evenings held for prospective LCA students. The fostering and development of these links with parents will enhance the working relationship between parents and the school.

Parents receive progress reports at the end of each term. These reports consist of formative comments for each subject area. Standardised report cards should be developed as a priority. They should include information regarding students’ attendance, behaviour, progress, commitment to the programme and where appropriate summative assessment results.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The LCA programme planning documentation is a significant body of work that outlines the organisational framework for the programme in the school and also supports the programme’s implementation and delivery. The plan contains: the school’s draft literacy and numeracy policies; enrolment and induction information; communication templates; curricular planning information; dates for trips and activities; minutes of meetings; LCA newsletters; student assessment results and work experience data including employers’ contact details.

A culture of evaluation and review exists within the programme. These reflective practices are informed by input from staff, the co-ordination team and some external agencies including the School Completion Programme co-ordination team. To further improve this reflection, students’
and parents’ views should be actively sought in order to improve the programme for future year groups. Moreover, when the co-ordination duties have been formalised the practice of holding regular core team meetings should be revisited.

2.2 Co-ordination

The duties of the LCA co-ordinator are clearly defined and significant efforts have been made to ensure that these duties have been fulfilled recently. These duties are wide-ranging and essential to the implementation of the programme in the school. The co-ordinator has designated class contact time with both LCA groups. This good practice allows for the maintenance of good levels of communication and for the development of a positive rapport between students and the programme co-ordinator.

Effective systems have evolved regarding the storage of students’ key assignments. These have helped to ensure that students’ work is completed within the designated timeframe and submitted in a timely manner. The supports provided by administrative staff have been instrumental in developing and implementing these systems.

2.3 Curriculum

The school complies in most instances with Department of Education and Skills guidelines and circulars regarding the implementation of the programme. The LCA curriculum provides students with a wide range of courses that are useful in the development of the required vocational and life skills. As part of its curriculum, the school offers Hotel Catering and Tourism and Graphics and Construction Studies as its vocational specialism subjects. In addition to these subjects, Religious Education is delivered in the four elective modules chosen. The provision of additional Art, Craft and Design lessons in sixth year allows students to develop skills in ceramics and mosaic tiling. The combination of subjects provided offers a very good blend of disciplines helping the students to develop their personal, vocational and general education skills.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

All coursework plans were presented. The plans were mostly of a high standard. To further improve coursework plans, specific literacy and numeracy development strategies should be identified in each subject area. Individuals with specific responsibility in relation to DEIS action planning should liaise with subject departments in order to expedite these plans and to improve the penetration of methodologies that support literacy and numeracy development.

The planning and preparation for all lessons observed were good and included some examples of exemplary practice. Planning for resources was effective in almost all lessons, with a wide variety of useful teaching aids and resources incorporated into lessons to assist student learning. This was particularly apparent in the vocational specialism subjects observed. Planning for the integration of ICT in the lessons observed was very limited. As part of its ongoing planning, the teaching team should identify applications of ICT and audio-visual media that would support and enhance students’ learning experiences.
Each subject teacher is given very good information about the educational needs of the individual students. In some cases this information identifies strategies appropriate to the further inclusion of students with additional educational needs in lessons. This practice is commended.

### 3.2 Learning and teaching

Teaching and learning in the lessons observed ranged from good to very good. All lessons observed were clearly structured and developed students’ learning in a sequential and structured manner. Where activities were used to support learning, students engaged fully and were keen to become active participants in the lesson. This was particularly evident in an English and Communication Studies lesson that focused on an element of drama studies. Examples of appropriate active learning methods observed included independent research, project work, collaborative learning strategies in the form of pair and group work and the incorporation of role play into lessons. These strategies were most successful and created participatory and vibrant lessons.

In the instances where literacy development was included as part of the lesson, students developed this key skill through the use of subject specific language and through reading short extracts of text aloud. Students were encouraged to read these extracts themselves to gain confidence before volunteering to read for the class group. This simple but effective strategy should be developed across the LCA teaching team. Useful online supports such as [www.wordle.com](http://www.wordle.com) would be most beneficial in quickly identifying problematic words and phrases in advance of any reading exercise and could be incorporated into lessons easily.

Very commendable practice was observed in one lesson where structured team teaching was utilised to develop students’ literacy skills. In this lesson the support teacher worked with small groups and focused the intervention on literacy development aimed primarily at subject specific terminology. This method was most beneficial. The considered utilisation of educational support in this manner should be extended to all subject areas in order to further develop learning support capacity in the mainstream subjects.

Subject specific key words were identified in a few lessons observed. This occurred through the use a variety of methods including mind mapping, listing and labelling. All LCA subject teachers should ensure that literacy development initiatives are integrated into their everyday teaching. In doing so, words, terms and phrases can be discovered, explained and revised daily thereby improving students’ literacy skills through repetition.

Students demonstrated good levels of learning and answered questions posed by their teachers and the inspector readily. The practice of peer assessment and review was observed in one lesson and this helped to encourage greater student participation. This assessment for learning (AfL) strategy helped to reinforce students’ understanding of subject matter especially when success criteria were outlined from the outset. This strategy and similar AfL methods should be incorporated into lessons where possible.

### 3.3 Assessment

Students’ class work was well monitored and received very good levels of formative assessment during the lessons observed. Teachers’ circulation of classrooms allowed them to advise students and ascertain their levels of engagement and their understanding of the subject matter. In almost all lessons each student received some degree of individual attention. This fostered the
development of a supportive rapport between teachers and students enabling constructive feedback to be administered in an encouraging manner.

Effective questioning strategies were utilised in a number of instances. Best practice was observed where, in addition to low-order questioning, students were encouraged to offer opinion and apply their knowledge. In some lessons students would have benefitted from some degree of collaboration with peers. This could have been achieved through the use of the think-pair-share strategy which helps individual students to formulate their ideas and opinions, firstly individually and then in pairs, before sharing their views with the group. The continued inclusion of active learning methodologies of this type should be pursued.

Students’ key assignments provided evidence of a significant degree of learning. In order to maximise learning, subject teachers should consider extending the use of formative feedback to students’ key assignments. This approach would help students to realise that the completion of key assignments is not the ultimate goal but only a step in the process of acquiring a key skill or gaining a more comprehensive understanding of a concept.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The positive culture of distributed leadership has enabled the maintenance of a well delivered LCA programme during a period of considerable transition at co-ordination level.
- The very good levels of collaboration between the LCA co-ordinator and the various support personnel have helped to maintain the quality of educational provision for LCA students.
- Effective organisational structures are in place to support the planning and delivery of the LCA programme.
- Very good systems have been developed to identify students who would benefit from participation in the LCA programme.
- The teaching and learning observed during the evaluation ranged from good to very good.

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

- School management should make every effort to formalise the co-ordination structures to ensure continuity of provision and the continued effective co-ordination of the programme.
- Practical strategies should be developed in order to further incorporate additional literacy and numeracy skill development methodologies into lessons.
- Students should be made fully aware of the programme choices available to them at the end of third-year and at the end Transition Year.
- Guidance modules should be delivered by a qualified guidance counsellor.

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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

St. Kilian’s welcomes the positive comments outlined in this Programme Evaluation. These comments reflect the dedication and hard work of our L.C.A. teachers during what was a time of considerable transition at co-ordination level.

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

St. Kilians would like to respond to the following sections of the report.

1.1 Since the completion of this report a teacher has been assigned the role of L.C.A. Co-ordinator.

1.2 The school Guidance teacher has been assigned to teach V.P.G.

3.1 The school is currently investing substantially in I.C.T. this will help facilitate the L.C.A. Programme with what it requires to enhance students learning with improved Audio Visual media.

3.2 A whole school approach to literacy is currently being developed in the school and its focus on classroom strategies should help L.C.A. classes greatly.