

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Applied
REPORT**

**Saint John's College De La Salle,
Ballyfermot
Dublin 10
Roll Number: 60510M**

Date of inspection: 6 October 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme in Saint John's College De La Salle, Ballyfermot. 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, deputy principal, the co-ordinator of the programme, learning support teacher 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 following the evaluation.

Saint John's College De La Salle is an all-boys voluntary secondary school in Ballyfermot, Dublin 10 and caters for 435 students, who come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. The school is part of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme. The school offers a variety of curricular programmes including the Junior Certificate, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the LCA programme. LCA has formed part of the school's senior cycle curriculum since 1996. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; a response was not received from the board.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

LCA is a well-established and vital component of the school's curriculum. Currently there are forty-one students enrolled in the programme. These students make up three class groups, two in fifth year and one in sixth year. The provision of an additional fifth-year class is an example of senior management's commitment to increasing the availability of the programme to students who require an alternative to the established Leaving Certificate programme.

Both members of the senior management team were previously or are currently involved in the implementation of the programme in the school. Their understanding and awareness of the programme were evident during the evaluation and senior management's enthusiasm for the programme bodes well for the future of LCA in the school.

In order to ensure that good awareness of the programme is maintained throughout the school, a number of measures are taken to promote and to publicise the day-to-day and occasional activities of the LCA class groups. These measures include LCA staff and student notice boards, allocation of time to LCA issues during staff meetings, LCA information sessions for parents and students and prominent display of students' work and achievements. These initiatives are commended as they help to promote the programme and also serve to recognise students' achievements publicly.

1.2 Resources

Staff are appropriately assigned to teach the programme. The decisions to allocate and deploy particular teachers to the programme are based on their individual skills, experience within the programme and their willingness to become involved in various tasks and activities central to the LCA. These considerations are appropriate and overall a good teaching team has been formed.

Currently, the students enrolled in the LCA programme are not assigned a base classroom. It is recommended that an appropriate room be allocated or prioritised for the LCA class groups if senior management can identify a suitable location. The benefits of providing the LCA groups with a base class would include the centralised storage of assignments and tasks, the possibility of locating information and communication technology (ICT) resources in their normal teaching and learning environment and the increased opportunity to display students' work. By providing a base class, shared by the three LCA groups, the co-ordinator and core team may find the implementation of common agreed themes for the programme, such as increased active learning strategies and literacy and numeracy initiatives, easier to achieve across the entire teaching team.

All LCA students are timetabled for the minimum twenty-eight hours instruction time in line with Circular M29/95. In addition to this, the organisation of the LCA curriculum is good and it complies with the relevant Department circulars. In a few instances, subjects are timetabled more than once on the same day. This practice should be avoided where possible.

Students reported that they have good access to ICT resources. It was reported that this access is particularly useful when key assignment and task-work deadlines are imminent. Teachers' access to ICT in classrooms was somewhat limited with only a few teachers utilising ICT to support students' learning.

The school provides the LCA students with many of the required consumables for practical lessons. Examples of the items provided for students include ingredients for students' Hotel, Catering and Tourism (HCT) lessons and materials for Graphics and Construction lessons. This positive intervention is a considerable support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Teachers' attendance at continuing professional development (CPD) courses dedicated to the delivery of the LCA programme is encouraged and facilitated by senior management. Induction for new teachers to the programme is mainly informal and carried out primarily by the LCA co-ordinator. As a significant skill set has been developed over time within the school, the use of this valuable resource to inform and mentor new teachers to the programme is commended and should complement individual teachers' attendance at centralised CPD provided by the support services.

1.3 Student selection and support

The school's admission policy does not detail the procedures for admission to the LCA programme. To clarify the procedures governing student selection and enrolment in the programme a review of the school's admission policy should take place.

A considered approach is taken to identifying students who would benefit from participation in the LCA programme. This occurs through a consultative process with the JCSP co-ordinator, the learning support department, the care team and third-year subject teachers. This approach is commended and helps to ensure that each student is suited to the LCA programme. Details of the programme are discussed with parents during information evenings held for third-year parents and

students are then asked to apply for a place in the programme. These structures are well-established and effective.

The organisation, structure and primarily the delivery of Guidance within the LCA programme must be addressed. While the whole-school guidance plan was made available to the inspector during the evaluation no guidance module plan was presented. The whole-school guidance plan outlines aspirational goals. The plan requires the inclusion of a considerable amount of detail in order to adapt it to the specific requirements of LCA students. This should be addressed as a matter of urgency using the syllabus guidelines for the Guidance module within the Vocational Preparation and Guidance course.

The supports provided for students in need of additional educational support are good. The collaboration and communication between the learning support team and the LCA teaching team results in each teacher being made fully aware of individual students' needs. To further improve this system, the learning support department should endeavour to identify supports and interventions for each student that would help subject teachers to improve the student's inclusion in lessons. The learning support teacher's occasional attendance at LCA core team meetings is commended and should be used as a catalyst to initiate the process of further developing teachers awareness and understanding of students' particular needs.

Students in receipt of resource hours are allocated additional literacy support in whole-class and small group formats. Ongoing assistance is given to some students during specific literacy development lessons and when task and key assignment deadlines are approaching. Currently the learning support department is in the early stages of developing a whole-school numeracy improvement policy. This policy should be used to highlight useful strategies to develop students' numeracy skills and give subject teachers clear direction in relation to implementing such strategies in mainstream lessons. Once this policy has been completed, a whole-school literacy improvement policy should also be developed and implemented.

An induction programme for students commencing the LCA programme takes place at the beginning of fifth year. This course primarily involves the explanation of LCA specific terminology and the modes of assessment employed during each session. To further enhance the students' experiences during their induction, the programme should be extended to include activities that would give students an opportunity to take part in teambuilding and other activity based exercises. Examples of possible induction activities can be accessed on the LCA support service website <http://lca.slss.ie/resources/downloads/Student%20induction.pdf>.

1.4 Home-school links

In addition to the information evenings that are held to inform parents and students prior to their enrolment in the LCA, considerable efforts are made to contact parents personally via letters, phone calls and meetings. This helps to answer questions that parents may have and also helps to inform them of the programme's benefits for their sons. The involvement of parents at an early stage and throughout the programme is most beneficial and should be fostered wherever possible. The success of recent efforts to include parents in various events organised for and by the LCA students has varied. To address this situation, individual meetings with parents have been used as the favoured strategy to encourage and maintain home-school links. The school's ongoing efforts to maintain a good level of communication with parents is commended.

Students are encouraged to record their daily activities in their student journals. This is a positive initiative because a well maintained journal not only serves as a detailed record of each students

work but can also be used to communicate students' experiences of the programme to their parents. This helps to validate students' work and also to inform parents of the wide variety of tasks and activities undertaken as part of the LCA programme. Students highlighted the need for teachers to recognise positive behaviour and suggested that their journals could also be used for this purpose.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

A good quality programme plan has been developed. This plan contains a wide variety of documents and records essential to the effective co-ordination of the programme. These elements include the LCA attendance policy, information pertaining to students in receipt of additional educational supports, records of student behaviour, application forms, template letters of acceptance, student selection and induction procedures, minutes of LCA teaching team meetings, student assessment records and work experience checklists. To facilitate regular review, elements of the plan that are currently hand-written should be updated to electronic format in order to streamline the process of future revisions.

Communication among the LCA teaching team is very good. The entire team formally meets up to four times a year and more regularly informally. The proceedings of formal meetings are recorded as is good practice. It was reported that subject teachers involved in anchoring tasks meet with other members of the teaching team in order to co-ordinate cross-curricular integration. This good practice is an area for further development and could be achieved by subject teachers collectively identifying topics and themes that are common to their subject areas.

Formal evaluation of the programme is carried out at the end of each year through the use of a student survey. Teachers are also involved in an informal manner through discussion and dialogue during team meetings. This good practice should be developed using the resources available on the LCA support service website. The further incorporation of regular evaluation and review will serve to improve, what one student described as "a programme that gets better every year". Evidence of this opinion is supported by the various changes that have occurred in recent times, namely, the provision of an extra fifth-year class and the inclusion of Active Leisure Studies as a vocational specialism.

As part of this ongoing review and development, the core team led by the LCA co-ordinator should identify key areas for development within the programme and lead the LCA teaching team in focusing on these key aspects at teaching team meetings. Possible areas for development include the promotion of active learning methods in lessons, the further integration of ICT into the teaching and learning environment.

Course module plans were presented for almost all courses. These plans were mostly of a high standard. Best practice was observed where topics were identified and specific learning outcomes for students were identified. The better quality plans also included strategies aimed at improving students' literacy and numeracy skills and identified subject specific supports for students requiring additional educational assistance. These good quality plans should be seen as exemplars for all subject departments.

2.2 Coordination

The duties of the LCA co-ordinator are clearly defined and carried out effectively. These duties are wide-ranging and essential to the implementation of the programme in the school. Communication between senior management and the LCA co-ordinator is good and this is enhanced by the deputy principal's current involvement as class teacher for one of the fifth year LCA class groups.

The co-ordinator has developed a number of protocols that ensure teachers take a common approach to the organisation of key assignments and tasks. One such protocol ensures that all teachers submit completed key assignments to the LCA resource area at the end of the relevant session. This helps to ensure that key assignments are completed within the designated timeframe and presented to the co-ordinator in a timely manner.

The programme coordinator has regular timetabled contact time with two of the LCA class groups. Both the co-ordinator and deputy principal meet with their respective class groups during periods one and seven. This helps to promote good attendance by ensuring that students who may be absent are tracked and any required documentation is collected. These arrangements are working well and students' attendance is good.

2.3 Curriculum

The school's LCA curriculum complies with the relevant Department of Education and Skills guidelines and circulars. The curriculum is wide-ranging and helps to provide students with courses that are useful to them in developing their vocational and life skills.

An interesting and worthwhile combination of subjects is offered to students in the three vocational specialism provided. These are Hotel Catering and Tourism, Graphics and Construction Studies and Active leisure Studies. These subjects are tailored to suit the school's student cohort and also provide students with a good foundation for further education courses provided locally. The elective modules offered by the school are equally diverse; these include modules from the Religion, Information and Communication Technology and Office Administration and Customer Care courses. Students expressed their general satisfaction with the courses offered within the school's LCA programme.

In addition to the taught programme, LCA students are also given the opportunity to partake in two work experience placements. Prior to their placement, students undergo a preparatory phase that takes place as part of their Vocation Preparation and Guidance course. Every effort is made to visit students during their placements and employers are also asked to submit a brief report on each student. Students are also encouraged to maintain a work placement diary to plot their progress and to record their experiences during both placements. To supplement the general curriculum a number of initiatives and activities are organised. One particular activity, the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) programme, aims to help develop students' entrepreneurial, sales, customer service and their presentation and communication skills. These are worthy aspirations and closely aligned to a number of the key principles of the LCA programme.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

During the course of the evaluation, the planning and preparation for almost all lessons observed were very good and included some examples of excellence. The planning and preparation of resources were effective in almost all lessons with a wide variety of useful teaching aids introduced to lessons to assist student learning. Examples of good practice included the preparation of utensils during Hotel Catering and Tourism lessons and the preparation of drawing aids and resources during Graphics and Construction lessons.

Best practice was observed where active learning methodologies were planned and implemented in line with course planning documents. It is recommended that the LCA team, as part of its ongoing review, share their experiences regarding the strategies and teaching methodologies that prove most successful, particularly with regard to the use of active methodologies with challenging students. It is suggested that the outcome of this exercise be included in the induction pack for teachers new to LCA.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Overall the quality of teaching and learning observed during the course of the evaluation was good. Almost all lessons were clearly structured and built upon prior learning in a sequential manner. In these lessons, learning outcomes were displayed on the board. In a few instances these learning outcomes were revisited at the end of the lesson. This practice should be extended to all members of the teaching team. Best practice was observed where lessons were delivered in a manner that supported students' continuous engagement in the learning process. This was achieved by teachers varying the lessons and introducing, developing and recapitulating topics during short, focussed segments.

Where student activity was used to support learning, students took an active role and responded well. Examples of these active strategies included independent investigation, research and pair work. Generally, these active learning strategies were observed less often than teacher-led methodologies. Students concurred with this view and felt that an excessive amount of time is spent completing individual writing tasks. It is recommended that the LCA teaching team makes every effort to further develop the implementation of active learning strategies in each subject area.

In some instances, words that occurred during lessons were highlighted and time was spent ensuring that students' spellings were correct. This commitment to developing students' literacy skills is commended. To further improve the benefits accrued by students, teachers should prioritise the important keywords. In doing so, students will be better placed to remember their correct meaning and spelling. Another successful literacy initiative observed during the course of the evaluation was the use of writing frames to support students' formation of texts. This technique can be extremely beneficial as it scaffolds students' work and promotes learning through repetition.

In almost all lessons students were managed in a firm and very supportive manner. In these instances, students were respectful and behaved very well. This resulted in the development of a positive atmosphere that fostered learning and facilitated teachers' implementation of their planned lessons. When classroom management was ineffective student learning suffered considerably due to low levels of participation and ill-discipline.

A good level of student learning was evident in almost all lessons observed. Students exhibited newly acquired skills and competencies through the completion of class activities and individual tasks. These skills, ranging from practical skills learned in their vocational specialism courses and practical achievement lesson to language skills developed as part of their English and Communications lessons.

3.3 Assessment

Students received very good levels of formative assessment during the lessons observed. This took the form of individual support and advice and close monitoring of students' class work. In almost all lessons each student received individual attention from the teacher and this resulted in teachers gaining a significant insight into students' levels of understanding.

In a few instances, common errors were analysed with the entire group. Where this occurred, learning took place in a collaborative manner, with most students participating in solving the problem. In addition to this good practice, other positive assessment techniques were employed occasionally. One such example was the use of formative feedback when correcting students' key assignments. This assessment for learning technique could be employed across the teaching team to improve students' outcomes and to further develop their understanding.

Questioning was used throughout the evaluation to inform teachers of students' progress. Best practice was observed in a Mathematical Applications lesson where each student was given ample opportunity to respond to questions and these questions were differentiated according to students' abilities. This ensured that students were willing participants in the activities and maintained concentration throughout the lesson.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- LCA is recognised by school management as a vital part of the school's curriculum and this is demonstrated through senior management's ongoing support for the programme.
- Good systems have been developed to identify students who would benefit from participation in the LCA programme.
- The planning and co-ordination of the LCA programme in Saint John's College De La Salle is carried out efficiently and effectively.
- A suitably diverse curriculum that is suited to the student cohort and prepares students for the locally available post-leaving certificate opportunities is provided in the school.
- Almost all lessons were planned and executed effectively resulting in good levels of student learning.

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

- The organisation, structure and the delivery of the guidance programme within the LCA programme should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

- A strategic plan for the further development of the LCA programme should be developed to include strategies aimed at the further integration of ICT into the teaching and learning environment and the identification and implementation of active learning methodologies.
- Senior management should consider the identification of a base classroom for the LCA class groups.
- The school's admissions and enrolment policy should be reviewed to include details of the enrolment procedures regarding the programmes offered in the school.

Published June 2011