An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
Leaving Certificate Applied Programme
REPORT

Presentation Secondary School
Sexton Street, Limerick
Roll Number: 64250J

Date of inspection: 23 September 2010
EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme in Presentation Secondary School, Limerick, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. 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 the core team following the evaluation.

Presentation Secondary School is a voluntary Catholic school under the trusteeship of CEIST – Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust. The school provides education for girls from the south side of Limerick City and its environs. The school has been involved in curriculum development for many years and, arising from this involvement, took part in piloting the LCA programme in the mid-1990s. The programme has been provided in the school since then.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

The LCA programme has a prominent position in the curricular provision of Presentation Secondary School. The principal is knowledgeable regarding the structure, organisation and aims of the programme and is committed to maintaining and enhancing its role in the school. Very good leadership is provided by senior management regarding the programme. Good practice is followed with regard to publicising the programme and informing students and parents of its aims and benefits in a timely and appropriate manner. Information supplied to parents of prospective first-year students includes reference to the availability of the programme in the school. Third-year students and their parents are provided with full information on LCA as part of the process of informing them prior to making their programme choice for senior cycle. Teachers are kept informed of the programme through inputs at staff meetings, by means of the LCA noticeboard in the staffroom and periodic announcements in the staff canteen. The programme is highly valued in the school.

Teachers new to the LCA are supported by the programme team and particularly by the co-ordinator and teachers of the course concerned. The co-ordinator informs the new team member of appropriate continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities and arranges for attendance. To further strengthen this aspect of team development, the structure of the induction process followed should be formalised to an appropriate degree and be included in the programme plan.

1.2 Resources

Teachers are assigned to teach the programme taking account of their qualifications and interests, in line with good practice. A large proportion of the team has been involved in teaching LCA for many years, some from its inception in the school during the pilot phase fifteen years ago. It is a
measure of the success of the programme in the school, and of the team, that the sense of commitment, interest and energetic involvement has not diminished. Appropriately qualified teachers are assigned to teach the guidance element of the programme in line with requirements.

The courses are generally suitably timetabled with appropriate amounts of teaching time being provided for completion of the modules concerned. However, in the case of a number of courses, a re-balancing of teaching time should be undertaken as indicated here. The time allocation for Social Education should be reviewed to ensure sufficient time is made available for completion of the six modules. In the case of the mandatory Introduction to Information and Communication Technology and the Information and Communication Technology specialism, the timetable should clearly indicate which periods are allocated to the teaching of each of these courses. The total time allocation to these courses also needs to be reviewed and increased appropriately, perhaps making additional use of the sixty-minute lessons already on the timetable. It is observed that Arts Education is allocated time in sessions one and two only. It is recommended that this course be continued across the four sessions.

Four elective modules, two in Religious Education and two in Science, meet the requirements of the programme. It is observed that the time allocated to these modules is in excess of that required. Sufficient time is allocated to complete the two baby care and childcare modules of the Childcare/Community Care specialism in sessions one and two. These modules constitute additional electives. The students expressed a high level of interest in, and satisfaction with, this aspect of their studies in particular. They expressed the view to the inspector that they would wish it to be extended into sessions three and four.

It is recommended, in the context of ensuring adequate time provision for all elements of the programme, that the very generous time allocation to elective courses be reviewed. Attention is drawn to the need to allocate thirty hours of instruction to each module of study, the minimum number of periods to be timetabled as a consequence and the impact this has on the time available for elective modules. Reference should be made to the advice of the LCA support service, and the associated proposed timetable, regarding the timetabling of the programme.

Good use of information and communication technology (ICT) in teaching was seen in LCA lessons in the course of the evaluation. This was facilitated by the recent addition of interactive whiteboards to both of the LCA base classrooms. The programme team is commended for its proactive involvement in further skills development in the use of these new resources. This is an initiative that should have a major impact on learning. These resources should be fully employed to gain maximum benefit from the recently acquired fast broadband links in the school, in particular to encourage further internet-based research by students as part of normal classroom activity as appropriate. The LCA classes are timetabled for regular use of the computer rooms, for their study of ICT, including its study as a specialism, and for lessons in other courses which are facilitated in the computer room on request. Such timetabling facilitates good use of the available ICT resources.

The use of ICT in the organisation and implementation of the programme needs some further development. The co-ordinators should be facilitated with appropriate ICT and internet access to ensure the efficient development of programme documentation and ease of administration.

Members of the programme team take an active interest in the further development of their teaching skills. They display an open attitude to change and improvement. There is an appropriate emphasis on CPD and the involvement of team members in it is encouraged and facilitated by the school.
1.3 Student selection and support

The procedures in place for the selection of students for the programme are equitable and effective. Consistent with the awareness in the whole school of the importance of LCA in the provision of suitable, inclusive education, students for whom LCA may be the most appropriate choice of programme are identified in the course of junior cycle. While many of the students availing of the programme will have completed the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), this is not in itself used as an indicator of suitability for LCA. Suitability is decided on an individual basis taking account of the broad educational interests of the student. This is very good practice.

Students are provided with a good level of guidance support in relation to programme choice. This support is delivered formally by means of programme choice meetings for students and their parents in third year and also less formally by teachers and guidance counsellors.

There is an appropriate range of supports in place for students in LCA who experience additional educational needs. These supports are co-ordinated by the Special Educational Needs co-ordinator and are integrated with the supports provided throughout the school. Students’ progress is assessed regularly and students are interviewed to help identify their particular educational needs. This structured involvement of students in the identification of their own needs, and in planning for meeting them, is good practice which encourages students’ involvement in their own learning. While educational support is often provided during Gaeilge Chumarsáideach time for students who are exempt from the study of Irish, a teacher has also acted as a support teacher in some lessons. This provision of learning support within the setting of normal lessons can be particularly effective, and should be expanded where possible and appropriate.

The system of assessing the progress of students with additional educational needs is being further expanded this year to include students in the LCA programme. Regular re-testing to measure the progress made by students is good practice and the outcomes should be considered in the course of programme review and planning for the further development of the LCA in the school.

Good practice is followed with regard to ensuring that students meet programme requirements in their work. The completion of key assignments is monitored by course teachers in a systematic manner. This important element of the programme supports the continued engagement of the students with their work. When students are in danger of not earning credits due to non-completion of key assignments, course teachers inform the programme co-ordinator who intervenes with the student and informs the parents as appropriate.

The mechanisms in place to monitor the attendance requirement of the programme are working effectively. Students are regularly reminded of the importance of attendance and compliance with the ninety-percent requirement in order to earn credits. When a student is in danger of losing credits due to poor attendance, the course teacher notifies the programme co-ordinator who interviews the student and, where necessary, engages the services of the home-school-community liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator who engages with parents. This is good practice.

Further positive strategies to counter non-attendance and early school leaving include participation in the School Completion Programme and the issuing of good-attendance certificates on completion of sessions. These certificates are presented by the principal and the programme co-ordinator, with appropriate ceremony, at the end of the session. This is good use of positive encouragement.
1.4 Home-school links

Parents are made aware of the nature and purpose of the programme, initially as part of the admissions process when a general description of the place of the programme in the school is presented. Detailed information on the programme is presented at a meeting for parents of third-year students which provides support for parents with regard to programme choice. Arrangements are made for parents to meet the guidance counsellor as required. Appropriate links are maintained between the programme co-ordinator and the HSCL co-ordinator.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

Evidence of effective planning, some of which was documented, was presented during the evaluation. A document outlining the programme plan sets out basic information under a comprehensive set of headings. In addition to this outline plan, there is a separate plan for most of the courses that form the LCA curriculum in the school. These course plans typically consist of information from the course descriptor and course planning written into the planning template provided by the support service. In some courses, this planning is cogent and comprehensive. The documents referred to above represent a start in the process of providing a written plan for the programme. Each of the sections of the plan needs to be expanded to provide a full description of relevant principles, procedures, processes, strategies and methodologies involved. The provision of course plans in digital form by each of the course teachers, and their inclusion in the programme plan, would aid the necessary expansion of the documentation. A two-year plan for each class should be provided from the beginning of session one to ensure that all requirements, including cross-curricular requirements, are met when and as required. This two-year plan should also address the sequencing of modules to ensure that the correct order is followed, particularly where modules are in different courses.

Cross-curricular planning takes place, particularly in relation to the arrangements for completion of students’ tasks. This is good practice that should be further developed and strengthened in the context of the expansion of the written programme plan.

Review and evaluation of the LCA programme in the school is informal and unstructured. It is recommended that this area of the implementation of the programme be further developed and formalised. In designing a structure for programme review and evaluation, care should be taken to adopt a collaborative approach and to include each of the interested partners, students and parents as well as teachers and senior management. Thought should also be given to involving the wider community, perhaps through co-operating employers and organisations with which the students have contact in the course of their studies. By adopting consistent review processes over a number of years trends indicating success or perhaps areas for improvement can be established and used to bring further improvement to the programme.

2.2 Co-ordination

Formal structures for the co-ordination of the programme are well established and are operating effectively. The two co-ordinators are actively involved in teaching the programme and maintain close and positive contact with the students. The programme co-ordinators maintain very good communications with school management and the staff as a whole regarding the programme.
Arrangements are in place for the two LCA co-ordinators to meet each week. This is good practice. The expansion of this core group, within existing resources, to include a small number of other team members, perhaps representing areas such as guidance, special educational needs, home-school-community liaison and a subject specialism should be considered to further assure the responsiveness of the programme to the needs of students.

2.3 Curriculum

The LCA curriculum in the school is in line with the requirements of the programme and complies fully with the guidelines of the Department. The curriculum is founded to a commendable extent on the preferences and interests expressed by the students. The specialisms offered, Hotel Catering and Tourism and Information and Communication Technology, help develop appropriate skills for students to move into employment or into further education in the Post-Leaving Certificate courses offered in the senior college on the same campus. This has led to successful outcomes for many of the students. The provision of elective modules from the Science course has also had a positive impact on the further educational opportunities of students.

3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

The LCA programme taught in the school is consistent with the published course descriptors and is in keeping with the underlying principles of LCA. Teachers’ written preparation provided for accurate and comprehensive programmes of work. In some instances, the teachers presented written plans for individual lessons and, in all cases, the lessons observed were coherent in structure and presentation. Teachers’ preparation also included effective planning for a range of resources that was used appropriately in the lessons observed. These included photocopied materials used in a variety of ways, including being cut and folded to demonstrate mathematical concepts. In a number of lessons, ICT resources, including some sourced on the internet, had been prepared and were used effectively. Printed materials, including local newspapers, were also in evidence.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Some very good teaching was observed in the course of the evaluation and all the observed lessons were conducted in a manner and at a pace that suited the students. In general, the teaching methodologies employed showed due regard for the inclusion of student activity and some element of student-led activity formed part of each of the lessons observed, including a well-integrated role-play exercise in one lesson. However, in some lessons students would have benefited from working in small groups or in pairs earlier in the lesson. This observation should be considered also in the context of classroom organisation and management. The LCA team should consider the merits of rearranging the base rooms so that the seating can accommodate students in small groups. Students could then begin working in groups at an early stage in the lesson and could, as required, be called to pay attention to a teacher’s input to the whole class. The rearrangement of seating would also avoid the tendency for students to sit on the periphery close to the walls of the classroom.

Skilled questioning formed part of the techniques used by each teacher. Students showed interest and engaged well with their teachers. Their replies showed growing understanding and the
teachers’ affirmation of this was noted often. The practical work observed was well organised and there was a very effective emphasis on health and safety in the practical lessons. Students in these lessons worked together very well and avidly followed the teacher’s instructions.

The students’ showed a keen interest in the work they undertook in the lessons observed and this was evident in their responses to the inspector’s enquiries.

### 3.3 Assessment

The students’ work in each of the courses, including completion of key assignments, is assessed regularly in class. There was evidence of a high degree of positive and encouraging annotation of students’ work in a number of their work folders and it is recommended that this good practice be adopted more widely and followed in all courses.

Teachers record students’ attendance in their teacher’s organisers and photocopies of this record are passed to the co-ordinator for filing, together with the requisite form for the award of credits. This is good practice.

There is some variation in the procedure adopted for the recording and storage of completed key assignments in the school. Most commonly, evidence of completion of key assignments by each student, together with other work completed by the student, is kept in a single arch-ring binder separated into different courses and sessions. To further improve this procedure, and to bring a greater level of formality and certainty to bear, the evidence of completion should be identified more clearly and collected separately from the student on completion of the module concerned. It is recommended that a standard method of recording and storage be adopted. A common signing-off procedure should be adopted, perhaps based on the key assignments checklist provided at the end of each module in the course descriptors. The evidence of completion should be passed to the co-ordinator, together with the completed form for the award of credits on completion of the respective module. The evidence of completion should then be held securely for possible inspection until the expiry of the appeal period in session four for that student. It should be noted that it is only evidence of completion of key assignments that should be treated in this way and not all the student’s work leading up to the key assignment. The most suitable procedures for recording the completion of key assignments and for storing the evidence of completion should be adopted by the whole team and these procedures should be simple, robust and effective.

### 4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Good use of information and communication technology is facilitated by the recent addition of interactive whiteboards to both of the LCA base classrooms.
- Suitability of students for entry to the programme is decided on an individual basis taking account of the broad educational interests of the student in line with very good practice.
- The structured involvement of students in identifying their own educational needs, and in planning to meet them, encourages students’ involvement in their own learning.
- The issuing of good-attendance certificates, presented with appropriate ceremony by the principal and the programme co-ordinator, provides commendable positive encouragement of attendance.
• Formal, well-established co-ordination structures are operating effectively and co-ordinators maintain very good communication with school management and the staff as a whole regarding the programme.
• Some very good teaching was observed in the course of the evaluation and all the lessons observed were conducted in a manner and at a pace that suited the students.

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

• The co-ordinators should be facilitated with appropriate ICT and internet access to ensure the efficient development of programme documentation and ease of administration.
• The programme plan needs to be expanded, and should include complete two-year plans for each class group together with course plans prepared by the respective course teachers.
• The core team should be expanded as indicated in the report.
• Review and self-evaluation of the LCA programme in the school should be further developed and formalised.
• Simple, robust and effective standard procedures for recording the completion of key assignments and for the storage of evidence of their completion should be adopted.

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