

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Programme Evaluation  
Leaving Certificate Applied**

**REPORT**

**Our Lady of Mercy Secondary School  
Ozanam Street, Waterford  
Roll Number: 64971W**

**Date of inspection: 5 November 2009**



# **EVALUATION OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme in Our Lady of Mercy Secondary School, Waterford. 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 member of the co-ordinating 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 also examined students' work and reviewed relevant documentation pertaining to the programme. The outcomes of the evaluation were discussed with the school principal following the evaluation.

Our Lady of Mercy Secondary School is an all-girls voluntary secondary school situated in close proximity to Waterford city centre. The school forms part of a long tradition of education provision dating back to the Mercy order's first school in the city which was opened in August 1900. The existing school is a modern building that has been extended to cater for the school's student population of 585 students. Students come from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and the school's curriculum strives to cater for students of all abilities through the provision of a variety of programmes. These curricular programmes include: the Junior Certificate, the Transition Year (TY) programme, the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the LCA programme. Of these programmes, the LCA is the most recent addition, having been introduced to the school's curriculum in 2007. 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.

## **1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION**

### **1.1 Whole school support**

Although only recently added to the school's curriculum, LCA is now firmly established in the school. Senior management's continued commitment to the programme is commended, and its recent decision to continue offering LCA to senior cycle students, based on the needs of the school's current student cohort, is laudable. Senior management also takes a central role in leading the programme and meets regularly with the co-ordination team in order to discuss pertinent issues and to provide direction for the programme in general. This level of support is commended.

LCA students have a positive identity in the school. This has been achieved through a variety of initiatives and strategies that have allowed them to work in partnership with their teachers and the wider student cohort. To further develop awareness of the LCA and the achievements of students taking part in the programme, consideration should be given to highlighting students' activities and projects through the use of notice boards for each class group. These notice boards could be placed in a prominent position in the school, thereby highlighting the groups' achievements within the school community.

There has been significant emphasis on identifying and availing of appropriate continuing professional development (CPD) courses for teachers who are currently deployed to teaching the LCA programme. This continued commitment to CPD is commended. Now that the programme is established in the school, senior management should endeavour to develop teachers' expertise in relation to the enhancement of appropriate teaching and learning strategies aimed at improving

students' literacy and numeracy skills. The considerable expertise within the school, for example that of the learning support team, should be utilised initially prior to identifying any additional external supports.

## **1.2 Resources**

A dedicated and suitably diverse cross-section of teaching staff is deployed to teach the LCA programme. This teaching team has remained relatively consistent since the introduction of the programme enabling the ongoing development of key teaching skills. The formation of the teaching team takes cognisance of the teachers' interest in the programme and their subject expertise. This is good practice. Induction of new teachers takes place at the beginning of the year and informally through the sharing of skills, experiences and methodologies.

The timetabling arrangements for both LCA groups fall short of the required twenty-eight hours instruction time per week. It is strongly recommended that, in line with Circular M29/95, this situation be remedied immediately. In some areas, namely Introduction to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Arts (Music), both LCA groups are combined in order to maintain the viability of the programme in the school. This practice is acceptable, provided that appropriate planning occurs in relation to the delivery and sequencing of specific modules with appropriate groups. Further work should be carried out to ensure effective planning in these areas.

The provision of a designated classroom for each LCA group is highly commended. Students in both rooms have access to a variety of appropriate ICT resources, enabling them to access information quickly and effectively. A number of subject-specific posters have been developed and are prominently displayed in both rooms. This is an area that could be expanded upon by encouraging all teachers to develop suitable resources with each group and displaying them in the students' classrooms. These resources could highlight key terms and phrases and could be used during lessons to recapitulate prior learning.

In addition to the provision of base classrooms, resources and facilities that support the effective co-ordination of the programme, including an LCA co-ordination office, are also provided. These facilities help to provide an environment that is conducive to effective co-ordination. This level of support from senior management demonstrates a significant commitment to the programme and is commended.

## **1.3 Student selection and support**

The school is currently in the process of reviewing its admissions policy. The draft policy presented during the evaluation includes a number of sections detailing the main aims of the LCA and the procedures for admission to the programme. By detailing the procedures for admission in such a manner, the school will ensure transparency in the enrolment procedures. This policy should be finalised and ratified without delay.

Application forms for the programme are available to all students entering fifth year. Students, whom the co-ordination team and subject teachers deem appropriate, are also encouraged to apply for the programme. As part of the application process, all students must undergo an interview where specific criteria for selection apply. Prior to the application deadline, students are given appropriate information pertaining to the programme during the annual senior cycle information seminar held in the school. These supports are commended.

Pastoral supports for LCA students are consistent with all other year groups. Year heads and class tutors all play a pivotal role in caring for their designated groups. This role includes monitoring student behaviour. The re-introduction of a core team for LCA would bring an added dimension to the care and support structures already in place for LCA students. This proposal is further developed in section 2 of this report.

Supports for students with special educational needs are made available and integrated effectively into some students' timetables, primarily those who hold valid exemptions from Irish. Good links have been developed with the special educational needs department, and there was some evidence of good collaboration between teachers and the special needs team, especially when supporting students in the completion of tasks and assignments. To further develop these support structures, it is suggested that team teaching be considered as a viable option to facilitate students who do not hold such exemptions from Irish.

An induction programme takes place for all new LCA students at the beginning of fifth year. This programme aims to help students make the transition into LCA through developing their understanding of the programme and by building a team spirit. When questioned, students were unable to recall the induction programme in any great detail or list any benefits that accrued from their participation. It is suggested that the co-ordination team looks to further develop the existing induction programme through the utilisation of the resources prepared by support services to further assist students' integration into the LCA programme.

#### **1.4 Home-school links**

The practice of presenting programme-specific information to parents of prospective senior cycle students is commended. At these meetings, parents are made aware of the nature and purpose of all of the senior cycle programmes offered in the school. This support helps to clarify issues for parents and also helps to educate the entire school community in relation to LCA.

Communication between the school and the parents of LCA students is good. Regular mid-term reviews focusing on attendance, punctuality, behaviour and academic progress in each subject area are conducted with all students. These reviews, in conjunction with the school reports and parent-teacher meetings, ensure parents are fully aware of their daughter's progress within the programme.

Occasionally, parents are invited to attend events held in the school such as coffee mornings and the graduation mass held at the end of sixth year. The encouragement of parents to attend events organised by and involving LCA students helps to further develop a positive relationship between home and school and should be extended where possible.

Through the organisation and planning of the programme, the LCA co-ordination team maintains a wide variety of contacts with local employers, support groups and other relevant outside agencies. Students are given the opportunity to visit local places of interest such as the local library and often benefit from the inputs provided by guest speakers who sometimes visit the school. These interventions and links with the local community are commended.

## **2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND CO-ORDINATION**

### **2.1 Planning**

A comprehensive LCA plan has been developed in accordance with good practice. This document contains a significant quantity of relevant information pertaining to the successful organisation of LCA in the school. This plan includes the programme's aims and objectives, timetabling structures, details of work experience procedures, student monitoring and review structures, attendance records and a section detailing relevant school policies. Other areas that should be considered for inclusion in the LCA plan include: a directory of appropriate and beneficial teaching and learning strategies, a section detailing the student induction programme and an evaluative section where ongoing review can be monitored, using achievable goals set within realistic timeframes. It is also suggested that, over a suitable period of time, this plan be transferred to electronic format in order to facilitate its regular review.

When the LCA was introduced to the school a core group of teachers was identified to meet regularly to plan, monitor and evaluate the programme. Recently these formal planning meetings have ceased to occur. However, regular meetings of the co-ordination team, consisting of the fifth-year and sixth-year LCA class tutors, are held periodically. In order to promote a more collaborative approach to the organisation and planning of the LCA, it is recommended that the school returns to its original model of planning and reintroduces a core LCA team. If possible, this team should have representatives from senior management, the student support team and the co-ordination team. This core team could then highlight specific areas for development within the programme such as: promoting a thematic approach to developing students' literacy and numeracy skills, identifying successful teaching methodologies that promote active learning among students and the further development of cross-curricular links and integration across student tasks.

Some records of previous LCA meetings were available in the LCA plan. More recent records of meetings were not included. Every effort should be made to maintain a continuous record of all relevant meetings as the compilation of an unbroken record of meetings helps to build up a history of recent issues, decisions and actions taken.

Individual teacher plans for modules have been devised in almost all cases. The majority of these plans were good and in some instances excellent. Models of best practice identify and link suitable learning activities and timeframes with the required learning outcomes. Plans developed in this manner should be seen as exemplars especially when reviewing modular plans in the future.

The school's LCA programme is reviewed on an annual basis. This review is carried out by the co-ordination team and the senior management team. The organisation of specific areas of the programme such as students' work placements has altered and been improved upon as a result of these reviews. This reflective practice is to be encouraged. To further develop programme review and evaluation procedures, the co-ordination team should utilise the various resources for LCA which are available on the website of the support services and also canvass student opinions in relation to the programme through the use of interviews and questionnaires.

## **2.2 Co-ordination**

The co-ordination of the LCA programme in the school is very good. The co-ordination team, made up of the class tutors for both LCA groups, work effectively together. Both co-coordinators have clearly defined roles that include the ongoing day-to-day organisation, planning, monitoring and evaluation of the programme.

There is regular communication between the co-ordination team and the senior management team and this helps to ensure that decisions can be made promptly when necessary. Both members of the

co-ordination team also have timetabled contact with their designated LCA groups. This contact also allows pertinent information to be disseminated among students and allows students time to discuss any issues that may arise with their respective co-coordinator. This good practice is commended.

The school maintains records on students' attendance, retention and ongoing data that details students' progression in the LCA through the compilation of records of the students' key assignments. While the method of management of these records is acceptable, a more efficient model should be devised. This model should be developed using a uniform approach where all teachers store and submit the records of key assignments in an agreed format. This would allow all key assignments to be stored centrally and provide a model that would allow the record of students' work to be filed and accessed in a consistent manner.

### **2.3 Curriculum**

The current LCA curriculum is broad and balanced and encompasses a wide variety of disciplines. However, when interviewed, students expressed an interest in the possibility of studying a number of subjects currently not offered as part of the curriculum. To ensure that the programme's curriculum reflects the needs, interests and abilities of its students, senior management should instigate a full review of all aspects of the LCA curriculum, initially focusing on the viability of alternative vocational specialisms, modern languages and arts courses.

In accordance with the school's ethos, Religious Studies is an element of the LCA curriculum and is undertaken within the elective modules. This forms a significant portion of the school community's end-of-year liturgical event. LCA students perform a central role at this event and this role culminates in the completion of their practical achievement task. The completion of this task, as part of such a prominent event on the school's calendar, raises the profile of LCA throughout the school community and is commended. Science modules are also offered within the elective modules. It was reported during the evaluation that these modules help students to develop key skills in preparation for specific employment opportunities. The elective modules currently offered as part of the LCA curriculum provide a good balance between promoting and delivering the school's ethos and preparing students for adult life.

The school's expectation for LCA students to experience a wide variety of work placements is good practice and helps to ensure that students maximise the benefits accruing from participation in the programme. Students are provided with very good support prior to their placements. This support includes interest-and-aptitude testing, identification of suitable work placements and a number of seminars delivered by the guidance counsellor which focus on relevant areas such as presentation, communication, personal goals and health and safety. The overall level of preparation, assistance and guidance provided for students prior to and after their work placements is commended.

During work experience placements, a member of the teaching team contacts the employer either by phone or in person to ensure that the work placement is beneficial to both the student and employer. This ongoing contact between the school and employers is essential for the effective organisation of students' work placements. After completing their placements, students are debriefed and goals for the remaining placements are then set. This is very good practice as it promotes reflection and personal development. Through the completion of their work experience diaries and their engagement in the various aspects of the vocational preparation and guidance lessons, students are given the opportunity to reflect on their individual experiences, thereby

enhancing the overall benefits of the modules. In addition to these supports, each group has a timetabled guidance lesson each week and this further supplements the students' experiences of working life. The organisation and delivery of the work experience aspects of the programme in the school is commended.

### **3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING**

#### **3.1 Planning and preparation**

The majority of lessons were very well planned. This included preparation of suitable resources, planning for the inclusion of ICT, and the structuring of lessons in order to enhance students' learning by developing topics in an incremental manner. Best practice was observed in a number of instances where planning focused on developing suitable teaching and learning methodologies that promoted active learning situations. All subject departments involved in delivering aspects of the LCA, as part of their ongoing subject planning, should continue to develop existing teaching and learning strategies that could be incorporated into LCA lessons to maximise student engagement and active learning. In doing so, subject departments could develop their combined skill sets by collaboratively identifying suitable methodologies and sharing ideas for the benefit of their students.

#### **3.2 Learning and teaching**

Lessons were well structured and appropriately paced. Lesson content was generally consistent with students' abilities and their capacity for more challenging work. The learning intentions of lessons were shared with some groups. This approach had the effect of outlining the success criteria for students and helping them to structure and assess their learning accordingly. All subject departments should adopt this good practice as a precursor to the full implementation of assessment for learning (AfL) strategies within the LCA programme.

A range of teaching methodologies and a variety of resources were effectively introduced to lessons to support teaching and learning. These methodologies included students' participation in independent research, pair work, surveys, visits to local places of interest and games and activities based on the specific topic. In addition to these methodologies, the use of role-play to assist in the development of students' interpersonal and communication skills is highly commended. Where these methods were utilised, students were more engaged in their learning and lessons were most successful.

Students' interest was maintained effectively when lessons were composed of a series of short activities. In one instance this was achieved by short teacher demonstrations followed by a number of student activities. This created a very active learning environment where students learned in an experiential manner. This good practice is commended and should be developed throughout the entire programme.

Questioning was used regularly throughout the lessons observed. Generally, questioning was characterised by lower-order questions and in some cases, chorus answering. The quality of questioning is an area that should be further developed. To achieve this, attention should be given to identifying individual students when seeking answers in order to avoid chorus answering. Recall questions should be used judiciously, with an increased focus on higher-order questions that require students to reflect and analyse before responding.

The incorporation of ICT into the teaching and learning of subjects was limited to students researching their contemporary issue task using the Internet and the use of data projection for demonstration purposes in another lesson. As there are a number of computers in each of the LCA classrooms additional utilisation of these resources is encouraged as a wide variety of online resources are available and could be readily incorporated into lessons. To progress this issue the co-ordination team should develop a strategic plan to develop the ICT resources available to the LCA teaching team and, over time, put initiatives in place to achieve these targets.

A good level of learning and understanding was reflected in students' participation in question and answer sessions and through their involvement in classroom discussions. Students also expressed the opinion that they developed a number of key skills during their LCA programme. These key skills and competencies align closely with the programme's overall goals of developing students' communication and collaboration skills and developing the individual at a personal and social level. Students' expressions of achievement in these areas indicate the level of success of the LCA programme in the school.

Classroom management was effective in all lessons observed. This was achieved through the development of a positive rapport between students and teachers and through the creation of an environment conducive to teaching and learning. Students contributed to this atmosphere by demonstrating positive attitudes to their learning and by their eagerness to become involved in all classroom activities.

In some lessons, key words were written on the board to promote students' literacy development. When adopting this strategy, the use of abbreviations should be avoided in order to maximise students' understanding.

### **3.3 Assessment**

A range of assessment modes is regularly used to assess students' learning. These include: monitoring students class work, questioning in class and formal pre-examinations. Students' tasks and key assignments also provide additional evidence of students' learning. Students' work demonstrated good levels of cross-curricular integration and good incorporation of ICT skills. To further develop the benefits for students which result from completion of their key assignments, teachers should differentiate their expectations and tailor the resulting feedback to students' abilities. In doing so, students of varying abilities can be encouraged to reach their full potential.

There is an effective and systematic procedure in place to record students' attendance and progress. This system is implemented at three levels: whole-school, LCA coordinator and subject-teacher. Students' attendance is good and a number of protocols are in place to ensure parents are informed when student absenteeism becomes an issue. The implementation of such strategies helps to promote positive attitudes among students in relation to attendance and this is borne out in students' attendance and participation rates in the programme.

Parents receive meaningful feedback on students' progress through the annual parent-teacher meeting and through written reports sent biannually. To promote self-evaluation, the LCA co-ordination team should consider conducting an annual analysis of the results of certificate examinations. Such analysis could help identify areas for development and could inform teaching and learning practices thereby ensuring continual improvement through the engagement in reflective analysis of student outcomes.



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

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Senior management is fully supportive of the LCA programme in the school
- The LCA programme is effectively co-ordinated
- A dedicated and suitably diverse cross-section of teaching staff is deployed to teach the LCA programme
- LCA students have a positive identity in the school and take part in a number of whole-school activities
- LCA students have very good access to ICT resources
- The organisation of students' work placement is effective and appropriately coordinated
- Planning for all lessons observed was very good
- There is a good level of communication between the school and parents of LCA students

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

- All LCA students should receive the minimum twenty-eight hours tuition time per week in line with Circular M29/95 and it is strongly recommended that the current situation in the school be remedied immediately
- An LCA core team should be identified and given the opportunity to lead, monitor, plan and evaluate the programme in the school
- A more efficient method of storing students' key assignments should be developed and implemented
- The school should review the current LCA curriculum and in doing so, seek inputs from current and potential students

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