Leaving Certificate Applied Programme
Discussion Paper

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Introduction

This discussion paper on the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme has been prepared for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to inform a review of senior cycle school education in Ireland. The purpose of the paper is to draw together existing research and data on the LCA and highlight policy lessons that can be learned from these studies. The paper is divided into three sections. Firstly, we provide a brief overview of the LCA in the context of international research on tracking and curriculum differentiation. The second section of this paper provides analysis of recent data on provision and uptake of the LCA using annual statistics from the Department of Education and Skills. Finally, we examine existing research and debates on the role and function of the LCA within senior cycle education in Ireland. We focus primarily on policy lessons from a range of empirical research carried out on the LCA programme covering the following themes:

- Decision-making around school provision of LCA
- Student pathways into LCA
- Student experiences of the programme
- Outcomes after leaving school compared to other Leaving Certificate leavers
- The role and function of LCA within broader senior cycle provision

The paper concludes with a discussion around keys issues for the LCA now and in future.

The Leaving Certificate Applied Programme

The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme is a two-year pre-vocational programme offered at senior cycle alongside the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). First introduced in 1995, the LCA was introduced as an alternative to other senior cycle programmes with the primary aim of preparing students for the world of adult and working life including further education (DES, 2001). More recently, Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton, described the LCA as a programme designed for students 'who do not wish to proceed directly to higher education or for those whose needs, aptitudes and learning styles are not fully catered for by the other two Leaving certificate programmes' (Dáil Éireann Debate, 2017). The LCA programme has three main elements: vocational preparation (including guidance, work experience, enterprise, English and communication); vocational education (including vocational specialisms, maths, information and communications technology); and general education (including arts education, social education, leisure and recreation, European languages) (DES, 2000). Other aspects of the programme include developing participants' ability to self-evaluate and reflect in addition to promoting the use of broad teaching methodologies and student-centred learning (DES, 2000). One of the main differences between the LCA and other Leaving Certificate programmes is that student learning is modular and instead of receiving grades for individual subjects, they receive a single award (pass, merit or distinction) based on credits gained over a two-year period. The qualification differs from the LCE or LCVP in that it is excluded from the CAO points system and therefore limits students in directly accessing third-level education (Banks, Byrne, McCoy, & Smyth, 2010).

International research on tracking and curriculum differentiation

In the international context, the LCA can be characterised as a form of tracking or curriculum differentiation (Becker, 1975; Iannelli & Raffe, 2007; Oakes, 2000; Raffe, 2003; Shavit & Muller, 2000).
Differences exist between countries around the age in which young people are placed in different tracks. In Germany and the Netherlands, tracking starts quite young, often after primary school, whereas in France and Italy this process can take place after lower secondary school (Brunello, Gianniniy, & Arigaz, 2003). In many countries, however, differentiation into academic or vocational programmes takes place in senior cycle where students are offered the choice of pre-vocational or vocational tracks leading to an apprenticeship or specialised trade, or a college preparatory track for entry into university. In Austria and Germany, for example, vocational tracks maintain strong links with employers and students receive specific vocational skills. In these countries vocational education is based on a system of dual education where students spend part of their education and training at a vocational school and another part in a company or firm (Koudahl, 2010). Other countries, such as England and the US, tend to have school-based vocational education where students learn more generic workplace skills with a mix of academic and vocational education. The LCA programme would also be considered to fall into this category of vocational tracking with the focus on general rather than specific vocational skills (Iannelli & Raffe, 2007).

Sociological debates on whether social class differences are reduced by offering differentiated curricula or whether alternative tracks exacerbate existing inequalities continue to dominate education research (Iannelli, 2013; Iannelli, Smyth, & Klein, 2016; Noddings, 2011; Reay, 2011). Traditional tracking literature often draws on two competing theories: human capital theory and social reproduction theory. Human capital theory views alternative tracks, such as the LCA, as a safety net for students who might otherwise have dropped out of school (Becker, 1975). In addition to guarding against leaving school, vocational tracks are often thought to reduce the risk of unemployment for more disadvantaged

students by providing them with specific trades or marketable skills (Arum & Shavitt, 1995; Iannelli, 2013). Alternatively, social reproduction theory argues that student pathways are socially structured and vocational tracks can therefore channel working-class young people into subordinate roles, thereby limiting their educational opportunities (Iannelli & Raffe, 2007; Shavit & Muller, 2000). Some describe this as the 'unintended consequences' as although vocational programmes are intended to assist disadvantaged young people, they may actually add to their exclusion and limit their life chances. Nodding (2011) believes that education systems that give students the choice of academic or vocational tracks are more democratic as they allow students to select courses that interest them rather than pursue college preparation courses where they might fail. In response, however, Reay (2011) argues entry into vocational tracks is less likely to be down to 'natural inclinations' or individual agency among students but rather a socially structured process. She believes that as long as vocational tracks are stigmatised 'stereotyped and devalued', vocational tracks will be what working class people do (Reay, 2011). This lack of parity of esteem between academic and vocational programmes (Oakes, 2000) is something which research has been found to be true for the LCA compared to other senior cycle programmes (Banks et al., 2010).

Background to the introduction of the LCA

Vocational education has developed relatively late in Ireland, compared to other countries. Its late industrialisation, the low status of manual workers and the involvement of the church in providing academic education in school played a role in this late development (Coolahan, 1981). Until the 1960s, a bipartite system of vocational and academic education existed with vocational schools offering students an alternative to the general education provided in secondary schools. These vocational schools provided two year full-time 'continuation education' designed to prepare young people for the labour market. Students completed the Group Certificate at the end of the two years but these schools did not offer the more academic Intermediate Certificate or Leaving

Certificate qualification. Despite this alternative education, Coolahan (1981) describes how Irish social attitudes continued to favour the 'more prestigious academic-type education which led to great opportunities for further education and white-collar employment' (Coolahan, 1981, p. 103). Hannan and Boyle (1987) also argue that vocational schools had a lower status in society and were more likely to have students from lower socio-economic groups attending (Hannan & Boyle, 1987).

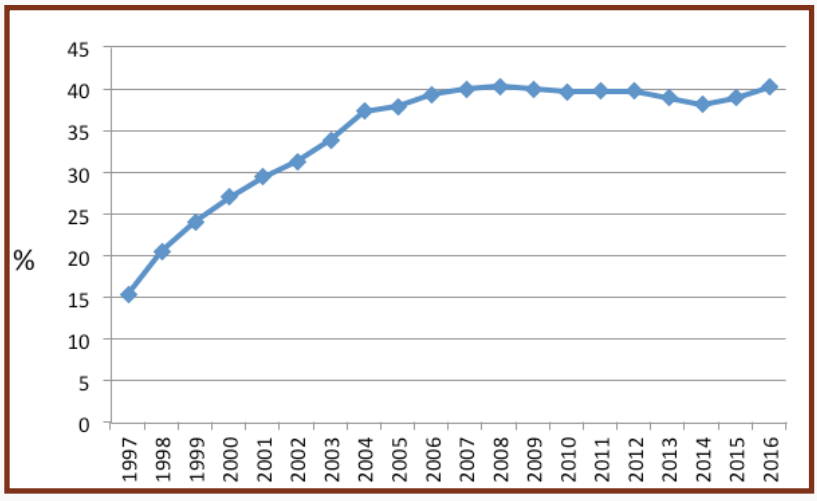
In an attempt to reduce the gap between vocational and secondary schools, comprehensive schools were introduced following the publication of Investment in Education (1966). These schools were created to provide a wide curriculum 'to match the aptitudes of their pupils' (Coolahan, 1981, p. 193). A further expansion of vocational education came in the 1970s with the introduction of Vocational Preparation and Training (VPT) programmes in vocational and community/comprehensive schools. These programmes sought to tackle high youth unemployment by targeting students who did not wish to pursue the LCE. Similar to the programme structure of the LCA programme, VPT programmes had a dual focus on literacy and numeracy and vocational skills offering students work experience and career foundation. In line with research on tracking and curriculum differentiation, however, these programmes have been associated with disadvantaged young people (Williams & O'Shea, 1981). Despite this and other initiatives[1], by the early 1990s there was growing recognition of the need to provide a vocational education under the umbrella of the Leaving Certificate (Lievens, 2006). After a series of national and international papers and reports (Government of Ireland, 1992; NCCA, 1990; OECD, 1991), the LCA was introduced in 1995; however, even prior to its introduction, concerns were being raised about its future status in schools (Coolahan, 1994).

[1] Such as Spiral I, Spiral II and the Senior Certificate.

LCA Provision Over Time

Individual schools decide whether or not to offer the LCA programme and there is no obligation for schools to do so. Schools often make this decision based on student composition and the way in which students enter/are accepted onto the programme is the responsibility of the school. The Department of Education and Skills particularly encourage schools with disadvantaged status (DEIS) to apply for the LCA programme (DES, 2009). Figure 1 highlights the growth in the provision of LCA over time. The percentage of schools providing the programme has grown from 15 per cent of schools in 1997 to 40 per cent in 2007, dropping slightly to 38 per cent in 2014 and increasing to 40 per cent by 2016.

Figure 1: Proportion of schools providing LCA over time

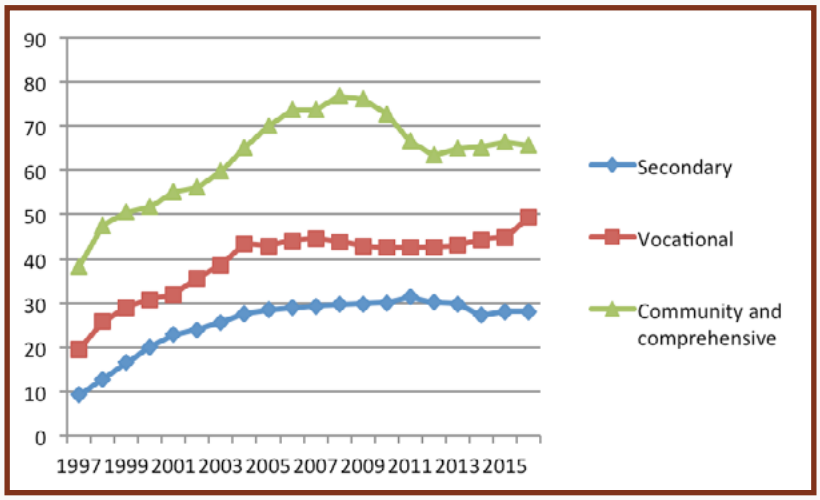


Source: DES Statistical Reports, various years; DES Statistics database

There has been some change over time in the variation in provision by school sector. Figure 2 shows that LCA provision continues to be highest in community/comprehensive schools; however, this sector has experienced a significant decline in recent years. In 1997 just 38 per cent of these schools provided LCA and this increased to a high of 76 per cent in 2009 and 2010. However, the proportion of community/comprehensive schools providing LCA has reduced to 63 per cent in 2012 with a slight increase to 66 per cent in 2016. Voluntary secondary schools are least likely to provide LCA, although provision increased steadily between 1997 and 2011 from nine per cent of secondary schools to 31 per cent. There

has been a small decline since then with 28 per cent of secondary schools currently providing LCA. LCA provision in the vocational school sector has increased from 19 per cent of schools in 1997 to 49 per cent of schools today.

Figure 2: LCA provision by school sector over time



Source: DES Statistical Reports, various years; DES Statistics database

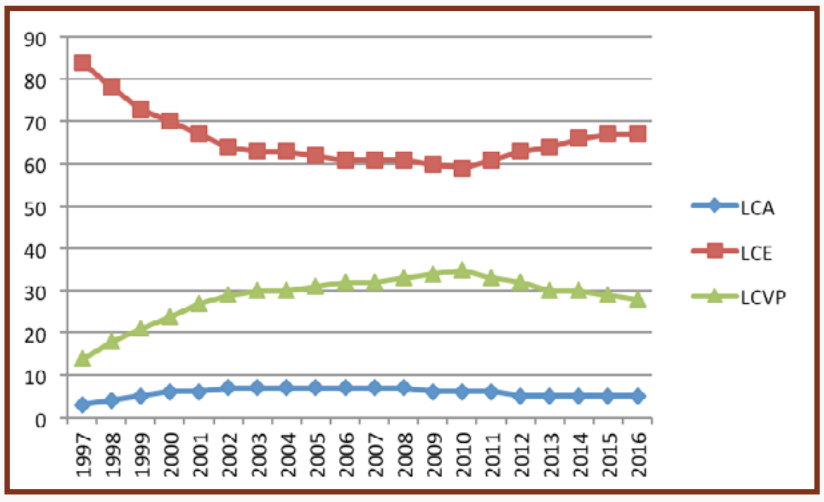
The patterns of decline in the provision of LCA suggest they are linked to the economic downturn which began in 2008. Budgetary cutbacks in schools and in particular limitations on the recruitment of staff may have meant that the provision programmes such as the LCA was negatively impacted. The differences in rates of decline between different school sectors, and, in particular, the decline of LCA provision levels in community/comprehensive schools, is less easy to understand, however.

Take-up of LCA

Figure 3 highlights how the majority of senior cycle students take the LCE although numbers have declined in line with increases in participation in the LCVP and, to a lesser extent, the LCA. In 1997, 84 per cent of students in senior cycle were in the LCE. By 2010, this had declined to 59 per cent and is currently at 67 per cent. Take-up of LCA by students has increased from 2.9 per cent of those in a Leaving Certificate programme

in 1997 to a high of 7.3 per cent in 2004, with a subsequent drop to 5 per cent in 2016 and 2017. Despite this decline, a sizeable number of young people, almost 6,000 in 2017, are taking the LCA programme. The LCVP experienced considerable growth in take-up between 1997 and 2010 increasing from 14 per cent to 39 per cent of all Leaving Certificate students. Participation has declined in recent years to 28 per cent of students. Within this context, it is important to note the rate of take-up of the LCA has remained stable despite marked increases in school retention rates generally. School completion rates have grown from 83.6 per cent in 1998 to 90.6 per cent in 2008 (DES, 2015). With more young people remaining in school, and in particular, more disadvantaged young people who are at greater risk of educational underperformance (Byrne & Smyth, 2010), it is perhaps surprising that the demand for LCA has not increased during this period.

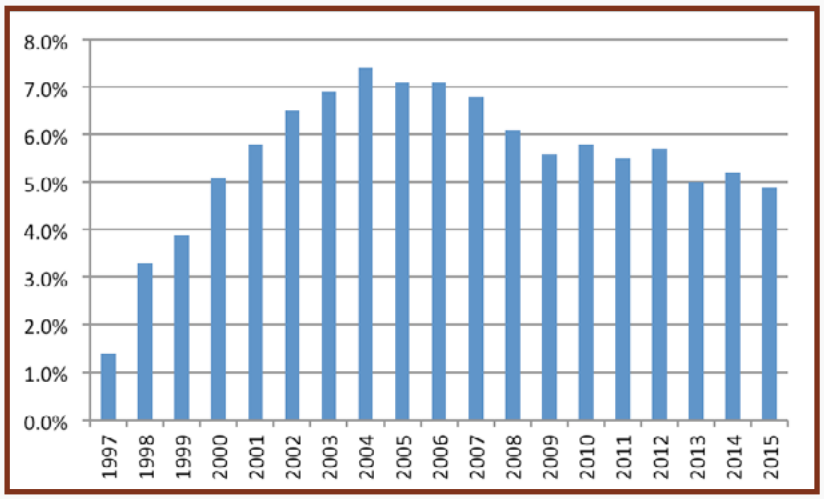
Figure 3: Participation in year 1 and 2 of LCA, LCE, LCVP



Source: DES Statistical Reports, various years; DES Statistics database

Figure 4 highlights the proportions of students taking LCA out of all Leaving Certificate candidates with LCA students making up about 5 per cent of all Leaving Certificate candidates. This peaked at 7 per cent during the mid-2000s and has declined slightly since then but remained stable.

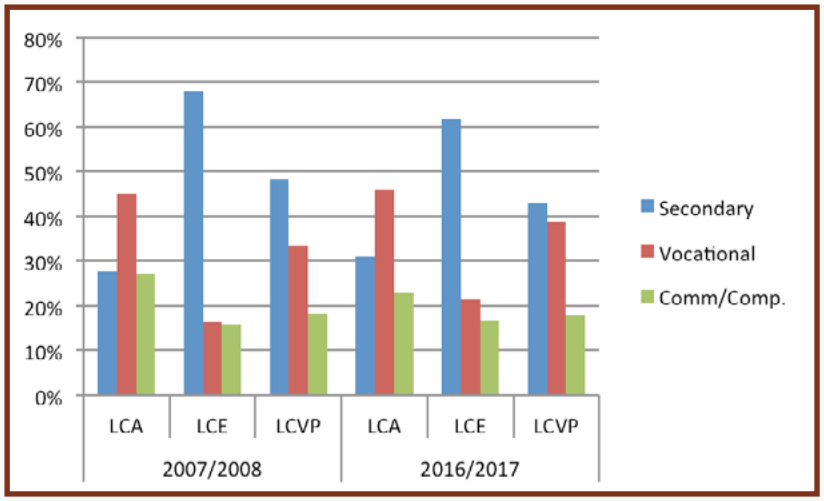
Figure 4: Proportion taking LCA among LC exam candidates



Source: DES Statistical Reports, various years; DES Statistics database

Figure 5 highlights how the LCA and other Leaving Certificate programmes are distributed across school sectors. Over 40 per cent of those taking LCA attend vocational schools and 31 per cent attend secondary schools. A further 23 per cent attend community/comprehensive schools and this proportion has declined slightly over time. Students participating in LCE are predominantly located in secondary schools (62 per cent attend these schools).

Figure 5: Distribution of students by programme and school sector



Source: DES Statistical Reports, various years; DES Statistics database

Existing Research on the LCA

There have been a number of small and large scale studies on the LCA over the past twenty years. Gleeson (Gleeson, 2000, 2002; Gleeson & Granville, 1996; Gleeson, O'Driscoll, & A., 2003; Gleeson & O'Flaherty, 2013) has published extensively on the LCA with a particular focus on the policy aspects of the pre-vocational course. A number of theses have been written on this topic, also providing interesting small scale studies (Lievens, 2006; Lynch, 2003). In 2010, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the NCCA published a comprehensive mixed-methods study on the LCA using national-level data and qualitative interviews with students who had participated in the LCA programme. Given the scale and depth of this study, it features heavily in this overview of existing research. More recently, the LCA has begun to feature in research relating to students with special educational needs (SEN) (Mc Guckin, Shevlin, Bell, & Devecchi, 2013; Squires, Kalambouka, & Bragg, 2016). These studies reflect the changing profile of post-primary students as the prevalence of SEN increases, resulting in a more diverse student population than existed previously. The LCA also features in a number of other studies focussing on early school leavers and second chance education such as the Youthreach programme (Byrne & Smyth, 2010). The impact of the economic recession on school leavers has been the subject of a number of research studies in recent years which have highlighted the negative post-school outcomes for LCA leavers, in particular, their increased risk of unemployment relative to other school leavers (Gleeson & O'Flaherty, 2013; McCoy, Smyth, Watson, & Darmody, 2014).

Thematically many of these studies have focussed on a range of aspects of the LCA from policy to student experience. Some come from the perspective of the school and teachers (Gleeson, 2002; Gleeson & Granville, 1996; Gleeson et al., 2003; Lievens, 2006; Lynch, 2003) while others focus on the student and in particular their pathways into, experiences of and outcomes from the programme (Banks et al., 2010; O'Connell, McCoy, & Clancy, 2006; Squires et al., 2016). This section provides an overview of existing research under a series of headings including: decision-making around school provision of LCA; student

pathways into LCA; student experiences of the programme; outcomes after leaving school compared to other Leaving Certificate leavers; and the role and function of LCA within broader senior cycle provision. There is a particular focus on the policy lessons that can be taken from these empirical studies.

Decision-making around school provision of LCA

Research shows access to the LCA for students depends on the type of school they are attending. Banks et al (2010) describe how LCA provision appears to be influenced by the 'perceived suitability of the programme' for the students attending the school. Their findings show how provision varies by school sector with the majority (70 per cent) of community/ comprehensive schools providing the programme compared to 40 per cent of vocational schools and under 30 per cent of secondary schools. In addition to school sector, LCA is more likely to be provided in DEIS schools, larger schools and English medium schools. The proportion of students taking the programme in a school averages at 23 per cent; however, there is marked variation by school characteristics. High take-up schools (those with 26 per cent or higher of the senior cycle cohort taking the programme) tend to be DEIS schools, vocational schools and schools in Dublin.

Student pathways into LCA

Using a typology of student characteristics, Banks et al. (2010) found that LCA students 'are quite different' from LCE and LCVP students before reaching senior cycle (p.146). This differentiation among students appears to happen during junior cycle and includes students who were more likely to say they would like to leave school and have lower occupational aspirations. The pathways into the LCA identified by Banks et al. (2010) include: students who struggle with their school work in junior cycle, experience behavioural difficulties in junior cycle, those who have special educational needs, those who felt misdirected into the programme by the school and those who wished to leave school and enter the labour market. The motivations for pursuing LCA include students who want to

take more practical subjects, those who felt they were 'unable' to do the LCE and those who felt influenced by others, including their teachers and their friends. Of course, many students can fall into multiple categories in terms of the reasons for selecting LCA. More recent research on students with special educational needs in post-primary education highlights the role of LCA in student retention. Qualitative interviews with young people and their teachers show that LCA can offer the opportunity to complete school with a qualification where they may otherwise have dropped out (Squires et al., 2016).

Student experiences of the programme and the LCA curriculum

Banks et al. (2010) found that overall student experiences of the LCA were positive. In particular, students favoured the use of more active teaching and learning methodologies in LCA compared to other senior cycle programmes. This included group and project work often made possible by smaller class sizes and more individualised attention from their teachers. The modular structure of the LCA was also viewed positively as it allowed for feedback on their progress throughout the year and reduced the stress associated with their final exam. Students were positive about the work experience component. However, there is a 'strong degree of gender differentiation' in the types of work placements by male and female LCA students. In particular, the research points to an over-reliance on the construction sector for males taking LCA. This is relevant given the timing of this study which was during an unprecedented economic boom in Ireland and prior to the collapse of the construction industry and rapid rise in unemployment during the recession that followed. This research also points to some negative aspects of student experiences of the LCA, including a lack of access to certain subject areas and the gendered nature of the vocational subject choices on offer. Students differed in how they perceived the LCA curriculum with some finding increased self-confidence and school engagement and others experiencing a lack of challenge in the courses provided. These positive aspects of the LCA programme have also been highlighted in smaller scale studies. Research by Lynch (2003) highlighted the role of LCA in improving self-confidence, life skills, classroom skills and maturity among students.

The issue of stigma and a lack of parity of esteem has long been associated with vocational education in Ireland (Banks et al., 2010; Coolahan, 1994). Banks et al. (2010) found that LCA students experienced name-calling and labelling as a result of being in the programme with some evidence that the LCA classes were sometimes physically located separate to the main school and were excluded from whole school activities.

LCA student outcomes compared to other Leaving Certificate leavers

The literature acknowledges that for some LCA students, particularly those with special educational needs, progression to further and higher education may take longer than other Leaving Certificate students (Mc Guckin et al., 2013). This is mainly because LCA is not accepted for higher education entrance and alternative pathways through further education and training are the only options for this group. Banks et al. (2010) examined the labour market outcomes of LCA leavers compared to other Leaving Certificate students and early school leavers. The findings show that LCA leavers are more likely to be in employment and less likely to be in full-time education a year after leaving school compared to other school leavers. The research also found that where LCA leavers continue to further education, the patterns are highly gendered with young men entering training programmes (including apprenticeships) and young women in Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) programmes (Banks et al., 2010). Again, this is significant given the volatile nature of the sectors in times of economic boom and bust for which these routes prepare young people. More recent research on post-school transitions by McCoy et al. (2014) also shows that LCA leavers have a distinct trajectory on leaving school compared to their peers in LCE and LCVP in that they are more likely to enter the labour market than go on to further education (McCoy et al., 2014). This study was able to capture the negative impact of the economic recession on LCA leavers' outcomes with this group less likely to 'realise their goals' and more likely to be unemployed upon leaving schools compared to LCA and LCE leavers. The authors note that 'the unemployment levels appear to have risen disproportionately among LCA leavers' which may be due to the overreliance on the construction sector for young male LCA leavers (McCoy et al., 2014, p. 36).

LCA within broader senior cycle provision: policy implications

The research undertaken on the LCA programme over the last two decades has been significant for policy not only in relation to the LCA but for senior cycle more generally. Some of the key policy issues highlighted across the literature examined include:

The role of the Junior Cycle in LCA entry decisions

Research shows that negative school experiences in junior cycle can influence the decision to enter the LCA. Banks et al. (2010) suggest that there may be less need for a differentiated programme at senior cycle if issues around school disengagement, negative teacher relations and being placed in a low stream class were resolved during junior cycle. The junior cycle reform may result in more engaging learning experiences for young people and contribute to their engagement in school, but its impact will depend on the extent to which a variety of teaching methods are used and are underpinned by more positive teacher-student relationships.

Social reproduction or safety-net

Research shows that ring-fenced programmes such as the LCA which are intended to assist disadvantaged young people often contribute to their exclusion. The findings show that disadvantaged schools are eight times more likely to have a high take-up of LCA compared to other schools. Within schools, LCA students tend to come from working-class backgrounds, lower streamed classes and have experienced disengagement from school during junior cycle. Students experience exclusion and isolation from other Leaving Certificate students and are often segregated from the school. Student outcomes are limited in that they cannot access third level and are guided into certain sectors of the labour market. At the same time, Banks et al. (2010) acknowledge the findings that some students would have left school without the LCA which would indicate that it acts as an important safety-net for certain groups.

Flexibility between Leaving Certificate programmes

The inflexibility of the Irish education system and in particular the curriculum is long acknowledged in research (Gleeson, 2000; Hannan, 1998). Gleeson (2000) argues that the ring-fenced nature of the LCA

is another example of inflexibility which he suggests contributes to the lack of parity of esteem between the LCA and other Leaving Certificate programmes and limits LCA student access to third level. Banks et al. (2010) also point to the need for greater flexibility between Leaving Certificate programmes for students who have changed their minds and wish to transfer out of LCA. For those wishing to remain in LCA, their findings showed that some students would have liked to take some LCE subjects in addition to their LCA modules. This type of 'personalised learning' (Sebba, Brown, Steward, Galton, & James, 2007) would allow for greater flexibility between programmes by combining different types of learning at the students' own pace. This has been raised as a particular point of concern for students with special educational needs who may require a more tailored curriculum (O'Mara et al., 2012).

LCA teaching and learning

One of the more positive findings from Banks et al. (2010) related to the types of teaching and learning in LCA and in particular what other Junior and Leaving Certificate programmes could learn from it. Small class sizes, active teaching methods, an interactive learning environment and continuous assessment over time were all viewed positively by LCA students. These teaching and learning styles appeared to have the effect of re-engaging some students with schools and improving their confidence and self-esteem. Furthermore, students appeared to gain from the work experience component of LCA by introducing them to the world of work and linking them with potential future employers. The study notes the potential benefits of adopting the teaching and learning strategies used in LCA in other Junior and Leaving Certificate programmes which would currently be more associated with an instructional or didactic pedagogy (Gleeson, 2002). In particular, the active teaching and learning methods used in LCA, including group work, continuous assessment, field trips and work experience, appeared to have the positive effect of re-engaging students with school, improving self-confidence and helping with career decision-making (Banks et al., 2010).

Summary

The purpose of this discussion paper is to examine existing research and data on the LCA in the context of senior cycle education and highlight key policy issues for the programme now and into the future. The paper firstly examined DES data on the LCA between 1997 and 2016 with a view to examining patterns of provision and take-up over time. The findings raise a number of important policy issues:

LCA provision

There are a number of features to note in relation to patterns of provision of LCA in schools. Firstly, since its introduction in the mid-1990s the number of schools providing LCA has increased and 40 per cent of schools now provide the programme. During the years 2013 and 2014 provision began to decline; however, by 2015 it was increasing. There is variation, however, in which school sectors provide the programme, meaning that whether a student has access to the programme depends on the school they attend. Although LCA provision continues to be more prevalent in community/comprehensive schools, there was a decline in 2012, 2013 and 2014 with a slight increase in the last two years. These patterns suggest that provision of LCA was impacted by the economic recession and staffing limitations or cutbacks in schools during this period. This does not, however, explain the extent of the decline in community/comprehensive schools compared to secondary schools and vocational schools which had a slight drop in provision during the recession. Further research is required on how schools decide to introduce LCA and the extent to which student intake is a factor in this process.

LCA take-up

Student take-up of the LCA has also declined somewhat over the past 7 years. Following a peak of 7 per cent of the senior cycle school population in the mid-2000s, the percentage of students participating in LCA appears to have levelled at 5 per cent. Take-up by school type varies with the highest uptake in vocational schools (over 40 per cent of LCA students), followed by secondary schools (31 per cent of LCA students)

and community/comprehensive schools (23 per cent). Interestingly, despite marked increases in school retention rates during this period, LCA take-up has remained stable. This means that students with lower Junior Certificate grades who could potentially take LCA are taking LCE or LCVP. There is no research, however, on how they are faring or whether they are doing well or underperforming in these programmes. There is potential to assess the impact of the LCA on student outcomes by using data from the State Examinations Commission (SEC) to track the grade profile at junior cycle of those taking LCA and compare their outcomes to similar students in LCE and LCVP.

The second part of this discussion paper examined a wide range of research and policy documents on the LCA programme over time. The findings of this research raise a number of important issues in relation to the LCA programme in the context of senior cycle education:

Entry into LCA

The literature highlights the significant role of junior cycle in influencing students' 'decisions' to enter the LCA with those with more negative school experiences more likely to enter the programme. These findings question the extent to which some students have an active choice in entering LCA or whether school organisation and process shape these decisions. Although the programme is intended to assist young people by providing an alternative to more academic tracks such as the LCE, it appears that those placed in lower streamed classes and those who have disengaged from school in junior cycle are more likely to take LCA.

Changing profile of LCA students?

The research suggests the need for further examination of the role of LCA in catering for students with SEN. The increasing prevalence of SEN in mainstream schools would suggest a greater need for programmes such as LCA in recent years; however, this is not reflected in levels of take-up. There is a need for up-to-date information on who is taking LCA, whether the resources available are adequate and if the curriculum is suited to their needs. Furthermore, LCA students are not assessed on the basis of spelling, grammar or punctuation. Further research is required on the

impact of these kinds of policies on literacy rates among LCA leavers and the extent to which have the skills needed for further education and employment.

Module content and level of challenge

The research to date suggests that the LCA module content has not been responsive to changing labour market conditions. How the content of the LCA modules is decided is not clear although it appears to have some commonalities with the content of modules covered in Post-Leaving Certificate courses and apprenticeships. In particular, studies have shown modules to be highly gendered with participation in traditional 'male' and 'female' vocational subjects such as Childcare and Construction. Studies also suggest that some modules lack challenge. This is potentially an issue in relation to Maths which is required for access to apprenticeships. Furthermore, the economic recession and in particular the collapse of the construction industry would have limited the level of access to work experience and apprenticeships with employers in this area. Consideration should be given to taking account of occupational and employment trends, and possibly drawing on the work of the Regional Skills Fora, in the design of new modules which can provide LCA students with more general labour market skills, such as ICT competence, career decision-making, analytical skills and entrepreneurial skills, which are less specialised and therefore less likely to be impacted by the economic cycle.

Outcomes for LCA leavers

There is a clear lack of information on student outcomes for LCA leavers, particularly since the discontinuation of the School Leavers' Survey in 2007. This survey provided vital information on the profile, experiences and attainment of young people in second-level education, including more vulnerable young people such as early school leavers and those in the LCA. Importantly, the survey captured the experiences of young people after leaving school allowing for comparisons between students who had participated in different Leaving Certificate programmes (Byrne, McCoy, & Watson, 2009). Although data are needed to examine the outcomes for LCA leavers, the research does highlight how LCA leavers

have suffered disproportionately during the recession and are more likely to be unemployed on leaving school compared to LCE and LCVP school leavers. Furthermore, research findings show that the LCA appears poorly connected to the labour market and there is no available information on the level of employer awareness or recognition of programme or qualification.

Future of LCA?

The research raises important questions around whether we need a stand-alone vocational programme or whether the methods adopted in LCA could be used to re-engage students into 'general' education. Research shows that the ring-fenced nature of LCA can facilitate the reproduction of social inequalities with students feeling excluded and segregated while in the programme. Furthermore, despite having positive experiences while in the programme (in terms of teaching and learning), student outcomes on leaving school tend to be poor with a much greater risk of unemployment. Greater flexibility within senior cycle education could provide students with the option of a more personalised Leaving Certificate with greater variation in subject choice and forms of assessment.

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