



**NCCA**

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta  
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta  
National Council for  
Curriculum and Assessment

# Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme: Report on case study with Midleton CBS

For discussion

BSC/C: 28.02.2022: 6b  
February 2022

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## Background

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As part of the communications in the Senior Cycle Review, two bulletins were distributed to all post-primary schools in 2018/2019 outlining the emerging themes. One of these themes was the need for more flexibility to include diverse pathways in senior cycle.

*Some of the challenges identified included a lack of access to technical, vocational, creative and professional learning; over-emphasis on a single pathway (the Leaving Certificate Established); lack of flexibility to combine aspects of different programmes; the absence of a follow-on pathway for students who access learning at level 1 and level 2 in junior cycle; and insufficient supports for student progression to a range of future pathways, with an over-emphasis on progression to third level. Greater flexibility to allow students to navigate different pathways through senior cycle was seen as desirable. (NCCA, 2019, p. 12)*

On receipt of this bulletin, one school approached the NCCA on the basis that this statement provided a rationale for the innovative programme they were developing to cater for the needs of a significant proportion of the student cohort.

The school, CBS, Midleton, Co. Cork, had examined the needs of their students and found that approximately 20% of the student cohort were not served by the existing emphasis on a pathway to third level. In order to engage these pupils in the Transition Year (TY) programme, the school developed a programme for TY students with particular emphasis on developing a pre-apprenticeship route. They focused on the construction industry trades due to a number of factors:

- Students polled during guidance sessions primarily selected construction-based apprenticeship programmes during an initial scoping period
- The school had industry expertise within the teaching faculty with a number of teachers having construction industry experience, including qualified tradesmen
- Amongst the student cohort it was obvious that there was interest in pursuing practical based careers given the traditional high demand for the practical subjects in the school.

Students who presented as being interested in learning more about the various construction trade apprenticeships through this process were then offered an independent module that was termed the Transition Year Vocational Class.

This class was organised and overseen by a staff member who in a previous career pursued and completed a construction trade apprenticeship and had a number of years' experience both locally and internationally working in this industry. This staff member undertook the role of TY Vocational Class Coordinator and liaised closely with the TY Coordinator throughout the process to ensure the success of this programme. Along with the enthusiastic support of local industry, they engaged in site visits, completed the Safe Pass course, went on work experience, and engaged with SOLAS to assess the needs for their apprenticeship pathways. One of the key learnings from this interaction with industry was the need for additional support in literacy and mathematical skills to fulfil apprenticeship employer requirements for these students. Additional classes in mathematics and literacy as well as IT skills were provided for students in this programme.

The success of the pre-apprenticeship TY programme gave rise to the need for a follow-on option for the students as they progressed into the next phase of senior cycle. It was the assertion of the school, that the LCVP was the most appropriate home for this apprenticeship pathway, called LCV(A)P by the school. The school developed a proposal for this pathway that built on the programme developed in TY and supported the needs of the students on their pre-apprenticeship progression. The proposal also did not preclude the students from alternative progression routes should their wishes change. However, the criteria for entry to LCVP excluded most of the cohort based on the Vocational Subject Groupings (VSG) necessary for acceptance onto the programme. The VSGs were updated in 2013 but they do not include any of the more recent subject specifications such as Politics and Society, Computer Science or Physical Education. Students who had selected these subjects as part of their subject options could not fulfil the requirements of LCVP entry. The NCCA was approached with a view to scoping the viability of the proposed programme in light of the stated aims and trajectory of the senior cycle review. This resulted in a case study to be conducted by CBS Midleton to examine the proposed LCVP with an apprenticeship focus, supported by the NCCA. At the time, it was envisaged that the findings of the case study would be used to inform decision-making in this area.

## The Case Study

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The terms of the case study were agreed in August 2019. The case study was to be of two years duration and would scope the potential for the removal of ring-fencing of LCVP and investigate the additional requirements or consequences of the proposal. The ring-fencing of LCVP is by means of the Vocational Subject Grouping requirements. Unless students choose the combination of subjects set out in DE circular 0040/2013 they cannot access the LCVP programme. The school undertook to supply feedback on the progress of the case study over the course of the two years and used the following criteria:

- The requirement to fulfil the Vocation Subject Grouping criteria for entry to LCVP was waived for this cohort of students (entry September 2019) and the following cohort of students (entry September 2020).
- The other entry requirements for LCVP still had to be fulfilled by the students, i.e. students would still be required to take a minimum of 5 subjects one of which must be Irish, must study two link modules, and are required to follow a modern foreign language (as outlined in DE circular 0040/2013)<sup>1</sup>

The CBS Midleton initial proposal contained other elements such as suggested adjustments to the final LCVP examination and the allocation of funding. These aspects of the proposal were not the

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<sup>1</sup>In cases where students are not following a Leaving Certificate or Junior Certificate programme in a modern European language, schools must provide a minimum of one language class per week over the two years, or equivalent, to meet the LCVP modern European language requirement. They may choose an LCA or FETAC option, or an alternative developed by the school. In the case of schools developed alternatives, assessment will be at school level and national certification, through the LCA and FETAC will not be available.

Students who are exempt from the study of Irish under the terms of Rule 46(c) of the *Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools* are still required to follow a modern European language module. Schools are reminded that they can develop their own module and adapt the level and content to the needs and abilities of the students concerned. However, assessment will be at school level for such options, and national certification, through the LCA and FETAC options, will not be available. (DE, 0040/2013)

subject of this case study. The reporting on the evolution of the case study suggested areas that may have been of interest. These included:

- Alternative apprenticeship pathways
- Scoping the needs of the students
- Liaising with local industries and businesses
- Liaising with other stakeholders such as SOLAS, ETBI etc.
- Assessing the guidance needs of the students over the duration of the programme
- Exploring the timetabling, teacher allocation and resourcing needs of the programme
- Exploring ways to enhance the status of the programme
- Exploring ways to report on student progress.

The case study was the responsibility of the school principal, with the assistance of his programme coordinator, and the TY Vocational Group coordinator. The interim and final reports on the case study were to incorporate the following:

- Timetabling arrangements
- Allocation of time for planning
- Record of site visits, visiting speakers, inputs from industry
- Record of career guidance sessions
- Feedback from students, parents and teachers
- Follow up report on student progressions
- Reflections on the process.

## **Support**

The NCCA agreed to support this case study over the duration of the investigation by providing advice and support on the design and implementation of the proposal and through mentoring provided by the link Education Officer. In addition, the Teacher Allocation Section in the Department of Education and Skills confirmed that it would also allow for the additional allocation, for the duration of the pilot project, of 2 hours per week for a programme coordinator for CBS, Midleton to support the piloting of the LCV(A)P case study.

## Reflections on the case study

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Over the course of the case study the NCCA link person visited the school and spoke to the teachers and students on the programme. There were also numerous phone calls and online meetings to discuss the progress of the case study. An interim report was produced by the school and presented to the Board for Senior Cycle. The following reflections are based on the interim report and later meetings and were presented by the school as part of their final reporting on the case study.

Year one of the case study was very successful despite the many challenges associated with the restrictions around Covid-19, a lot was learned about the practicalities of supporting the students in the areas of literacy, mathematics and career guidance.

For the Programme Coordinator and the TY Vocational Group coordinator, the focus was to support students considering an apprenticeship route while using elements of the LCVP to support this work (full details of the outline plan can be found in Appendix 1). Topics from within the LCVP were used, and included career investigations, work experience and development of interview skills. It became apparent very quickly that time limitations were a significant barrier to progress as there were only two class periods per week allocated to achieve the intended outcomes for the students. These two class periods were divided: one for LCVP material and one for extra maths tuition as requested by the students.

After a review of year one, the first cohort (32 students, entry September 2019) were offered the option of continuing with a view to undertaking the LCVP exam of June 2021 in one group or moving to a new group where they would not take the exam in order to focus more extensively on the other pre-apprenticeship elements. 16 students opted to take the LCVP exam and 16 had opted not to sit the exam. Both groups studied seven subjects; for those opting to take the exam in LCVP, it was their eighth subject. The second cohort (entry September 2020) are proceeding with the LCVP programme in readiness for the LCVP exam June 2022.

Covid-19 and the resulting restrictions had a severe impact on the aspirations of the case study. Site visits, work experience, Safe Pass courses and visits by industry leaders had to be abandoned for most of 2020 and 2021. The original aims for the case study, to develop pre-apprenticeship skills for students and expand progression pathways, were hampered as a result. Other contextual factors had an impact on the case study such as the retirement of the principal in 2020 and the repeated school closures over the two years of the project.

However, the issues identified by the Transition Year pre-apprenticeship programme such as the need for an increased focus on literacy, mathematics and ICT skills and more sustained career guidance over the two years of the case study did result in disengaged students reassessing their career prospects and identifying alternative pathways after school. Of the 30 students who completed the course in 2021, 12 are following apprenticeship programmes and 9 are following further education courses in various areas such as nutrition, psychological nursing, sports and business management and architectural technology. This second group was an unexpected consequence of additional career guidance and exploration of career pathways beyond the traditional route to third level.

## Timetabling

At the beginning of this case study, timetabling in Midleton CBS worked on a three-yearly cycle. It was not possible to change the timetable at the start of the case study for the students entering fifth year in 2019 and 2020. The result of this was that both of these groups had only two periods per week, at a tutorial time slot, to undertake the LCVP and additional apprenticeship focused elements. LCVP at the time was chosen as an additional eighth subject, picked against the option of two tutorial classes per week.

The format of LCVP was changed for students entering fifth year in 2021 and it was offered as a full subject option with three hour-long classes. This allows for the LCVP core requirements to be taught alongside the additional classes in literacy, mathematics and ICT and the pre-apprenticeship skills and activities. This eliminates the time pressures which gave rise to the difference in focus for the initial two cohorts.

The new timetabling arrangement sees the programme timetabled against the Modern Foreign Languages options. In the past, students opting out of the languages would have been offered Construction Studies or Business as an alternative. The school acknowledged that the new timetabling arrangements makes fulfilling the language requirement for the LCVP difficult, but for this particular group of students, language options tended not to be a popular choice.

The elements of the extra apprenticeship focus which were curtailed for the initial two cohorts were the extra maths class per week, the extra literacy skills and the ICT element. This was unfortunate as the benefits of the material in the LCVP course once coupled with support given in the maths, literacy and ICT classes included confidence building for many students and empowered many of these students to explore new career pathways. While extra career guidance can point out these pathways, for students who have felt left out and disengaged from second year, a support mechanism that walks with them as they embark on those pathways is needed. It is the school's view that it is too big a jump for those whose confidence has been dented to go the

distance alone. For these students, they need the LCVP material coupled with weekly core academic skills building classes.

The new timetabling arrangement and the extra time it provides enable the school to fully realise the hopes for the programme and once again show that LCVP is the most appropriate home for the apprenticeship pathway.

## Planning

Three 40-minute class periods were available for the coordinator as part of the case study. This proved invaluable at this early stage in establishing contacts and relationships with employers, SOLAS and other interested parties. It takes time to identify the key personnel within these organisations, meet with them and together work out a programme that matches the students' needs, the employers' needs, and what's possible by way of talks, school visits, site visits etc.

## Pre-Apprenticeship inputs

Covid-19 proved to be a significant disruptor of the programme. In summer of 2020, the five internships that were organised had to be cancelled as companies grappled with the new reality of Level 5 lockdowns. Planned talks and site visits in the final term, April-May 2020, were also cancelled and the Apprentice of the Year Award was cancelled along with the School Awards Ceremony.

In Autumn 2020, work experience was arranged in conjunction with the CIF (Construction Industry Federation) and a number of industry partners. Unfortunately, once again the increased Covid-19 restrictions in October prevented this from happening. Individual students were able to make arrangements for work experience at that time. The class were able to go on a site visit to one of the local industry supporters and met and engaged with the apprentices there. Contacts with the industry partners continued and many are now starting their recruitment process. The guidance team and the Vocational Coordinator have been fully informed of these opportunities for the students and interview training has recommenced. The completion of a Safe Pass course is a pre-requisite for work experience in the construction industry. This is challenging for students as the course is expensive and, due to Covid-19, there is a significant backlog which is further hindering the completion of this essential element of pre-apprenticeship training.

## Career Guidance

The chief benefit for the students has been a continual weekly focus on careers. For the 32 initial cohort students, this led to over two thirds of them reconsidering further and higher level as their main option, with a consequent increase in their engagement with their schoolwork. This was made possible through the close cooperation and support of the guidance team. For these students, the majority of whom would not have been able to participate in LCVP without the

waiving of the Vocational Subject Groupings, the class provided a safe environment where together as a group they could share their doubts and worries for the future. The extra maths classes in fifth year, and the mentoring provided via the extra career guidance focus, challenged them to reassess their academic identities and to re-engage with their studies with a clearer understanding of the post-school opportunities open to them.

### **Vocational Subject Groupings and a pre-apprenticeship pathway in LCVP**

Change is always difficult and challenges are to be expected, but the potential of an apprenticeship programme embedded in LCVP is a very exciting prospect. Covid-19 has proved a significant disruptor for so many of the initiatives envisaged but the school is still firmly of the belief that LCVP, freely accessible to all students, is the appropriate home for the apprenticeship pathway programme. Of the 32 students who took part, well over half would not have been able to participate if the VSGs had been in place. All students have benefitted from the weekly career focus and the mentoring that the coordinator and guidance team provided. While due to Covid-19 the school was unable to run many of the activities planned, the programme was still of great benefit to these students and provided a safe space for them to explore and challenge their educational identities.

## Findings from the case study

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Based on the experience of conducting the case study, CBS Midleton reported the following findings.

- The principle finding from the case study was that access to LCVP should be open to all students. The limited access to the programme through the restrictive Vocational Subject Groupings should be removed. There should be no barriers to students' education especially within the education system.
- The Modern Foreign Language requirement for LCVP should be discontinued. The requirement is historical with its origin being associated with the establishment of the LCVP in Ireland. It is out of touch with reality and does not serve the students well. Again, there should be no barriers to students' education.
- In order to fully benefit from the expanded LCVP, it should be timetabled as a full subject equivalent in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Year. Traditionally, LVCP had been timetabled as two 40-minute classes as an eighth subject option opposite tutorial time. Recognition of LCVP as a full subject equivalent affords more time to support the students in their core academic skills so that real transformation of student identities and future possibilities can be achieved. Time is the key to unlocking the potential of both LCVP and these students. For those who have fallen behind, it is not enough simply to point out new career pathways, you need to walk the start of the journey with them and give them the academic tools to access the opportunities ahead.
- An IT element should be developed within the LCVP core curriculum in order to closer align the programme with industry expectations.
- A sustained career guidance focus incorporating career investigation and interactions with industry is an essential element of broadening the scope of progression pathways for students.
- Schools delivering the Apprenticeship Pathway Programme in LCVP should receive a minimum additional allocation of two hours each week for coordination purposes in order to establish links with industry, employers, further education providers and apprenticeship routes.

While the findings from this case are limited to the experience of one school, many of the issues raised echo concerns expressed in the senior cycle review around the restrictions on access to the programme. The equity of access for students is impacted by the narrow definitions of the vocational subject groupings and the language requirement. These findings along with the other recommendations made by the school in relation to the development of the programme, should be considered in any future redevelopment of senior cycle.

## Appendix 1: Outline Plan

### Aims:

Students will:

- Be innovative and enterprising
- Take responsibility for their own learning
- Adapt to changing circumstances
- Evaluate data and devise solutions to problems
- Communicate their thoughts and ideas effectively
- Work with others as part of a team
- Investigate and plan career options
- Use information and communications technologies
- Investigate local businesses operating within the construction industry
- Learn from their experiences

### Objectives:

The students should be able to-

- Identify the main sources of construction industry employment in the local area
- Identify the principal economic activities of the local area
- Understand current Health and Safety regulations in the workplace
- Compile and create a Curriculum Vitae in word processed format
- Identify and analyse the aptitude and skills required to pursue a specific career
- Plan and organise a work placement
- Work co-operatively with others as part of a team
- Describe the qualities and skills of enterprising people
- Report on a visit by an entrepreneur operating within the construction industry to the classroom and on a visit to a local industry operating in the construction sector

**LCVAP Team:**

Programme Coordinator

LCV(A)P Coordinator

Link Modules Teachers (3 teachers)

The Team-

The LCVP team is formed and meets at the beginning of the school term, during prescribed subject planning meetings and informally as the need arises throughout the academic year.

**Time Allocation**

5th Year:

Two forty minutes (Monday and Tuesday P.8 , 2.25-3.05) running parallel with tutorial groups

**Teaching Instruction Approach:**

It is envisaged that a team-teaching approach would best serve the needs of the Vocational group.

**Modern European Language:**

The Modern European Language requirement for this LCV(A)P cohort will be delivered by two of the Class Tutors in French or German dependent on the students' prior language subject options.

**Table 1: Outline plan**

Term	Emphasis
Term 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Setting up process – creation of LCVAP group</li><li>• Students begin career investigation portfolio</li></ul>
Term 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• School visits by industry leaders across a variety of trades to meet with the students and to provide an in-depth investigation into the activities associated with their given trade</li></ul>
Term 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students undertake the Safe Pass course in the school (those underage in TY)</li><li>• Students visit the Ireland Skills Live Expo in Dublin</li><li>• Site visits to industry projects.</li></ul>

- The Vocational class will reside within the traditional LCVP syllabus and will run twice weekly for forty minutes per period of instruction.
- Thirty-two students will be split into two class groups of sixteen based on their previously investigated apprenticeship careers during the TY vocational module.
- Each class group will be assigned two teachers who will operate in a tutor role focusing on eight students each.
- Applied Apprenticeship Maths (AAM) classes will be offer to the students, which will be a combination of the required Maths and Physics.
- The traditional LCVP syllabus will be followed with all students in this cohort taking part in the Link Modules. Both modules, Link Module 1 Preparing for the World of Work and Link Module 2 Enterprise Education compliment the rationale for running a Vocational Apprenticeship class.
- The Programmes coordinator will collaborate with the Vocational coordinator and the LCVAP team (tutors) and will hold regular meetings to discuss learning outcomes from a teaching and learning perspective as well as administrative issues that may arise throughout the duration of this case study.
- Students will continue to attend Industry visits, attend in-house and external careers seminars, Industry leaders will visit the school to continue the links created by the Vocational team to date. This continual support and contact time is imperative to the success of this programme.

Students are responding to the presence of Industry representatives, both employers and learning institutions, visiting the school which is allowing for conversations and links to be created.

- An Apprentice of the Year award will be included as part of the Student Awards at the end of the school year. It is hoped that five internships (One winner and four runners-up) will be made available as an incentive to the students participating in the Vocational group.
- A staff learning log will be kept as an ongoing learning tool to improve and modify elements of the course both for this year's cohort and going forward with next year's group. This log will be an honest representation of both the positives and negatives experienced in the rolling out of this programme.



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