

STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED PROGRAMME

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Some countries incorporate all young people into a comprehensive school system and others divide students into different educational ‘tracks’ based on levels of ability. The relative merits of these different approaches have been a central focus of international academic and policy debates on second-level education. Traditionally, the Irish second-level education system has been characterised as a general education system, which deals more with academic than vocational learning. In 1995, however, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme was introduced to provide an alternative to the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The aim of the LCA is to prepare students for the transition from the world of education to that of adult and working life including further education; however unlike the LCE/LCVP there is no direct access to third level with an LCA qualification. Since its introduction, participation has increased and LCA students now make up seven per cent of the Leaving Certificate cohort. A new study[†] examines students’ experiences of the LCA and explores the processes involved in Irish students choosing or being assigned to the different Leaving Certificate programmes. The study draws on information about student experiences of school prior to entering the LCA, their learning experiences during the programme, and their educational and occupational experiences when they leave school.

International research has shown the process of placing young people into programmes according to their ability can have two sets of effects: firstly that programmes provide a safety-net for young people who are at risk of leaving school early or academic underachievement, or secondly, that the process of tracking students channels working class students into subordinate roles and limits their educational opportunities. This research shows clear social class inequalities in the take-up of LCA and highlights how the option of a differentiated curriculum at senior cycle attracts a distinct social profile of

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students who are predominantly working class. The report finds that LCA students are quite different from students in the LCE and the LCVP, before reaching senior cycle. Students' negative academic and school experiences formed during junior cycle determine their entry into the LCA and the programme appears to attract a diverse group of students, which includes those who struggle with schoolwork, experience behavioural problems, wish to enter the labour market when they leave school (particularly males), have special needs or learning difficulties, and those who feel 'misdirected' by the school into taking the programme.

The report shows that a discussion of the LCA cannot be carried out in isolation but must incorporate the wider educational context in which the programme operates. Findings highlight how junior and senior cycle programmes could benefit from the teaching approaches and methodologies used in the LCA. The ways in which students re-engage with the school process is evident in how they respond to small class sizes, modular credit accumulation, work experience and an interactive teaching style. Findings also show, however, that issues exist for students around lack of challenge in LCA, in particular Maths and English, which some young people found too easy and repetitive of junior cycle subject content. Moreover, feelings of exclusion and in some cases segregation from their peers in the LCE/LCVP programmes are compounded by the lack of flexibility in moving between programmes and the limited choice of subjects available to them.

The report provides a valuable insight into the post-school transitions of young people who participated in the LCA programme. In particular, the analyses point to the channelling of LCA participants into the labour market upon leaving school with a high proportion of LCA students entering unemployment relative to LCE/LCVP students. Furthermore, the research highlights relatively low levels of progression to post-school education and training. Where such transitions are made, they are highly gendered and, due to a lack of recognition for direct entry to third-level institutions, restricted to courses in further education. Among labour market entrants there are also difficulties, with LCA school leavers often confined to distinct sectors such as construction for young men, and personal service jobs for young women.

The findings of this research suggest that the LCA can re-engage young people with school and, in many ways, act as a safety-net for those at risk of early school leaving. However, the study also shows that the 'ring-fenced' nature of the LCA programme may facilitate the reproduction of social inequalities. In addition to attracting students from predominantly working class backgrounds, the way in which LCA is provided in schools means that students often feel excluded from other Leaving Certificate groups and, in some cases, segregated from the main student body. In line with findings from international research on the effects of curriculum differentiation (Gamoran, 1987; Oakes, 1985; Ayalon, 2006), this report suggests that the differences in post-school outcomes between LCA and LCE/LCVP students are attributable, in part, to the nature of the LCA curriculum and its restrictions in accessing third level. In addition, however, there is evidence that students self-select into LCA as a result of low achievements, aspirations and overall negative

experiences of school during junior cycle which has important policy implications for all of second-level.

The analyses presented in this report are based on survey data of young people leaving school over the 2001-2005 period and qualitative interviews with young people in the summer of 2008. This period was, for the most part, an era of exceptionally rapid economic growth and (almost) full employment. The situation has changed dramatically since then. Unemployment in general and youth unemployment in particular have risen at an unprecedented rate, making new entrants to the labour market extremely vulnerable. The position of school leavers from the LCA programme is likely to be particularly problematic today, given that these groups have been traditionally concentrated in the construction and services sectors. Their low levels of post-school educational participation relative to other LCE/LCVP school leavers are likely to leave them further exposed in the current climate. Economic changes are also likely to impact on the ability of current LCA participants to secure work experience placements and thereby gain the full benefits from participation in the programme.

[†] BANKS, J., D. BYRNE, S. MCCOY and E. SMYTH, 2010. [*Engaging Young People? Student Experiences of the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme*](#). Dublin: The Economic and Social Research Institute and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.