LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED REFORM REPORT 2023

JACK MCGINN, ISSU EDUCATION OFFICER 2021-2023

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

FOR STUDENTS, BY STUDENTS

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FOREWORD

A Chara,

The following is a report on Leaving Certificate Applied Reform created by the Irish Second-Level Students' Union, hereafter referred to as the ISSU.

The ISSU believes a critical part of Senior Cycle Reform must be reforming Leaving Certificate Applied, further integrating Leaving Certificate Applied, and expanding access to further and higher education through Leaving Certificate Applied.

There is responsibility on those within the Department of Education, and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to ensure that the voices and experiences of students compiled in this report are utilised to enhance LCA Reform in the coming years. There is also an onus on educational stakeholders and unions to ensure that LCA reform is central in their campaigns for Senior Cycle Reform.

The next five years will be pivotal in Irish education, the time to act is now, the time to hear students is now, to make a better system for the students of tomorrow.

While this is the end of the road for my journey within the ISSU, I know this report and its findings will live on and lead the charge in securing the best education system for our students.

Beir bua,

Jack McGinn

Jack McGinn

Education Officer 2021-23

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We welcome you to the ISSU Leaving Certificate Applied Reform Report, in partnership with the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, a tool which we hope will be used in future years to guide the ISSU and other stakeholders on LCA reform.

This research was carried out in order to understand students' experiences with LCA, and to inform the position of the Irish Second-Level Students' Union on LCA and how to best campaign for these students.

ISSU Education Officer, Jack McGinn, designed and distributed a survey on Leaving Certificate Reform to a representative sample of second-level students from different backgrounds. Initial design advice came from the Economic & Social Research Institute (ESRI). The data gathered is representative of the makeup of the student population of Ireland, and illustrates both the flaws in the current LCA system from a student perspective, as well as students' vision for a reformed Leaving Certificate Applied system.

Key Findings

78.7% of respondents believe that the LCA programme encourages creativity, curiosity and engagement, with less than 1 in 10 students in disagreement (8.5%).

77.1% of respondents feel strongly about their progression options regarding further educational opportunities.

75.1% of respondents do not think the transition year programme should be compulsory.

65.3% of respondents feel that the system of exams, attendance and tasks accurately reflects the work over the course of LCA.

Key Findings Continued

29.4% of respondents believe that society places a lot or moderate amounts of value onto the LCA programme.

46.3% of respondents felt that other students view the LCA programme somewhat or very negatively.

20.4% of respondents on average, thought the level of mental health supports the respondents had received during the LCA programme in school was poor or very poor.

24.1% of respondents believe that the academic work and/or prospect of the assessments during the LCA programme had a moderate or severely negative impact on their mental health.

THE IRISH SECOND-LEVEL STUDENTS' UNION

The Irish Second-Level Students' Union is the umbrella organisation for over 550 second-level student councils in Ireland. The ISSU represents, uplifts and defends the student voice of second-level student members and campaigns for a better quality of education and access.

Students are one of the main stakeholders in education and have a right to freely express their views in all matters that affect their lives.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This report has been composed using data from the Irish Second-Level Students' Union, Leaving Certificate Applied Survey.

This survey will be presented at the ISSU Education Symposium held in Trinity College Dublin in June 2023. At the symposium, the report and LCA will be discussed among education stakeholders.

SURVEY PROCESS

The survey process began with creating our sample pool which is outlined in the section below.

The questions used in the survey were decided by taking into account academic and social aspects of the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme, along with consultation from ISSU Officers, the ISSU Education Team and other stakeholders.

SurveyMonkey was the software used to distribute the survey and to acquire the data which is present in this report through text and graphs.

SAMPLE POOL PROCESS

The ISSU took careful consideration when selecting the schools to take part in the LCA survey. These schools were chosen as they fulfilled certain characteristics (including same-sex, co-educational, ETB, fee-paying, boarding schools, and Gaelcholáistí including schools in the Gaeltacht).

This helped to gather a representative sample of student opinion on the topic of LCA reform.

DISTRIBUTION

This survey was distributed to the 50 ISSU member schools that agreed to take part in the survey via email. The survey information was then sent to either schools' principals or LCA liaison teachers so they could share all the information with their LCA cohorts.

SURVEY ANALYSIS

Once the survey was closed, the data was collected and viewed by the Education Officer. This was then interpreted by ISSU Staff and the ISSU Education Officer delegated sections to the ISSU Education Team. The ISSU Leas-Uachtarán and ISSU Equality Officer then joined the project and assisted with the final stages.

Regarding data understanding, when rounding, the ISSU will round to the nearest 0.1 decimal place. In essence, if data presents as 17.39% it will be rounded to 17.4%, or alternatively if data is presented as 19.21% it will be presented as 19.2%. This may lead to a small rounding error in the adding to 100%. However, it does not create a significant or relevant discrepancy in the overall findings.

RESPONDENTS

The Leaving Certificate Applied Survey assessed over 250 responses across the following counties; Cavan, Clare, Cork, Dublin, Galway, Kildare, Kilkenny, Limerick, Meath, Monaghan, Offaly, Tipperary, Waterford, Wexford and Wicklow, etc.

Breakdown of Counties
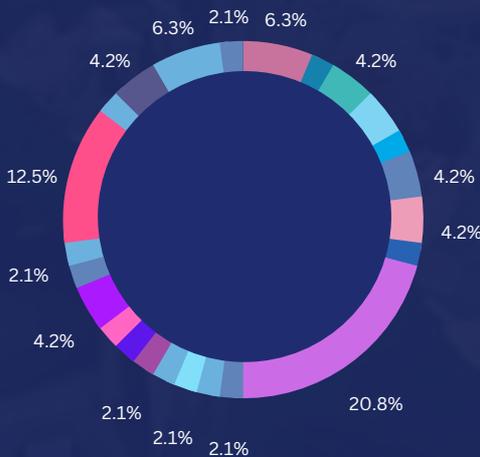
Galway 6.3%	Laois 2.1%
Offaly 2.1%	Wexford 2.1%
Kilkenny 4.2%	Westmeath 2.1%
Wicklow 4.2%	Donegal 2.1%
Carlow 2.1%	Kerry 4.2%
Tipperary 4.2%	Kildare 2.1%
Waterford 4.2%	Cavan 2.1%
Roscommon 2.1%	Cork 12.5%
Dublin 20.8%	Mayo 2.1%
Limerick 2.1%	Clare 4.2%
Meath 2.1%	Monaghan 6.2%
Louth 2.1%	Longford 2.1%

Breakdown of LCA 1 and LCA 2 Students

LCA 1   56.82%
LCA 2   43.18%

The breakdown of respondents is a total survey pool of 264, with a further split of 150 (56.82%) being in LCA 1 and a further 114 (43.18%) being in LCA 2.

LCA 2
43.2%

LCA 1
56.8%
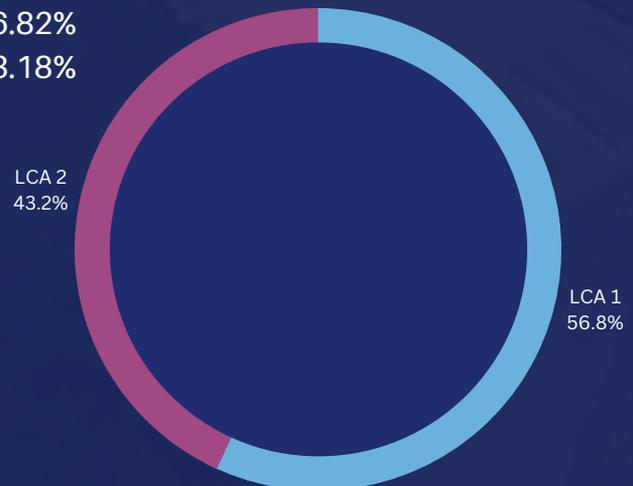
SECTION 1: CURRICULUM

INTRODUCTION

Section 1 focuses on the Curriculum which Leaving Certificate Applied students study over their two year course, along with details on 'if and how' LCA students participated in the Transition Year programme and the work experience module.

FINDINGS

When asked to consider if the LCA encourages creativity, curiosity and engagement, respondents trended positively with:

- 21.6% strongly agreeing
- 57.1% agreeing
- 12.7% did not have an opinion, or felt neutral toward this statement
- 4.6% disagreed
- 3.9% strongly disagreed

Therefore, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents (78.7%) agree that the LCA encourages creativity, curiosity and engagement, with less than 1 in 10 students in disagreement.

When asked to consider if respondents felt that the skills learned during their LCA prepared them to leave second-level education, the responses trended slightly more negative, while on the whole remaining positive:

- 24.7% strongly agree
- 46.3% agree
- 19.3% did not have an opinion, or felt neutral toward this statement
- 6.6% disagree
- 3.1% strongly agree

Where it can be seen that there was an increase in negative feeling towards preparation from the previous responses, jumping from 8.5% negative to 9.7% negative, the majority of agreement still stands where just shy of three-quarters of respondents still agree with the statement.

When asked if respondents found their LCA subjects interesting, the following results were stated:

- 15.8% strongly agree
- 43.6% agree
- 23.9% did not have an opinion, or felt neutral toward this statement
- 12.4% disagreed
- 4.6% strongly disagreed

Whilst only 8.5% of respondents at least somewhat disagreed that they did not find the LCA to encourage creativity, curiosity and engagement, twice as many (17%) found that they were not interested in their subjects. Whilst the data trend remains positive with 59.4% in agreement of liking their subjects, a combination of poor indicators, resulting in just shy of a third of respondents, 'not liking their subjects' is a worrying trend.

The above discrepancies are slightly explained by the results of asking respondents if they enjoyed doing the LCA, whereby the following results yielded overwhelmingly positive attributions to the programme with:

- 38.2% strongly agreeing
- 42.9% agreeing
- 6.2% did not have an opinion, or felt neutral toward this statement
- 6.6% disagreeing
- 6.2% strongly disagreeing

This resulted in an 81.1% overwhelmingly large majority agreeing that they enjoy the LCA programme compared to 59.4% (21.7% difference) of those enjoying subjects. It seems that while a particular method may be working in one, it may not be present in another. There may be an explanation for this. For example, when respondents were asked if their school provided a satisfactory choice of modules, their response was:

- 74.6% felt as if their school did
- 25.4% felt as if their school did not

The above may be an indicator as to why some people enjoy the programme but not their subjects as can be seen when asked to elaborate on which modules were lacking the following were mentioned on several occasions:

- Art
- Community
- Childcare
- Science
- Business
- Home Economics
- Languages (French and Spanish being most frequent)
- Religion
- Hotel & Catering
- P.E
- Vocational Preparation
- Geography
- Hair Dressing
- Computer Studies / ICT Skills
- Wood Work
- Agricultural Science

Many respondents felt as if they were 'pigeon-holed' into a certain spec of subjects with a noticeable amount from varying schools stating subjects were picked for them, in advance with limitation of choice. This would be a concerning pattern with regards to autonomy of elective modules within curricula education and removal of the autonomy of the student voice in making decisions in their own best interest.

When asked if respondents had completed Transition Year (TY):
- 31.3% chose to complete TY
- 5% completed a compulsory TY
- 61% chose not to complete TY
- 1.5% did not have the option as it was not offered in their school
- 1.2% were not accepted into TY

However, when further asked if respondents thought TY should be compulsory:
- 17.1% said yes
- 7.8% said yes, but only if there is a national framework/curriculum/course
- 75.1% said no

When asked if respondents felt the Work Experience portion was of value;
- 30.2% felt it was extremely valuable
- 32.6% felt it was very valuable
- 26.7% felt it somewhat of value
- 6.6% felt it of little value
- 4.3% felt it of no value at all

These findings, combined with ISSU anecdotal knowledge of a strong desire during events of young workers wanting more information about workers rights, is a strong indicator of the LCA providing a growing workforce in Ireland; particularly with at least 89.5% indicating the work experience providing somewhat of a level of value to their learning experience. Many students felt that COVID-19 made a significantly negative impact on their ability to source a meaningful working environment, with some suggesting that they enjoyed working consistently once a week on an ongoing basis rather than a large block of time.

CONCLUSION OF RESULTS

Based on the survey results, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents have a positive perception of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. Over 78.7% of the respondents agree that the LCA encourages creativity, curiosity, and engagement, indicating a favourable response towards the programme's ability to foster these qualities in students. There is a slight decrease in positive sentiment, when considering whether the skills learned during the LCA prepared them to leave second level education. For example, 71% of respondents agree, with the majority still acknowledging the programme's effectiveness in this regard.

Regarding the interest in LCA subjects, approximately 59.4% of respondents expressed agreement, which is a positive trend. However, it is concerning that around 17% of respondents indicated their lack of interest in their subjects, signalling a potential issue that needs to be addressed. This finding highlights the importance of further investigating the reasons behind this lack of interest and exploring potential solutions to enhance student engagement.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that a significant majority, 81.1%, enjoy participating in the LCA programme itself, indicating overall satisfaction with the programme. This finding contrasts with the percentage of students who enjoy their LCA subjects, suggesting that the programme structure and content may be contributing positively to student enjoyment, even if some individual subjects are not as appealing.

The survey also revealed that 74.6% of respondents felt that their schools provided a satisfactory choice of modules. However, some respondents expressed concerns about limited autonomy in choosing elective modules, with a notable number of students feeling 'pigeon-holed' into specific subjects. This limitation of choice raises questions about the autonomy of student decision-making and the need for a student-centred approach to curriculum design.

Regarding Transition Year (TY), a minority of respondents chose to complete TY, whilst the majority opted not to do so. Furthermore, the survey results indicate that 75.1% of respondents do not support making TY compulsory, suggesting a preference for maintaining the voluntary nature of the programme. This finding should be taken into account when considering any potential changes to TY requirements.

The work experience component of the LCA programme was generally perceived as valuable by the respondents, with over 89.5% indicating that it provided some level of value to their learning experience. This finding, coupled with anecdotal knowledge from the ISSU about the desire for more information on workers' rights, suggests that the LCA programme contributes to the development of a workforce in Ireland.

Finally, the survey highlighted the negative impact of COVID-19 on students' ability to source meaningful work environments for their work experience. Some students expressed a preference for consistent, ongoing work once a week rather than a large block of time. These insights should be considered when designing work experience components in the future, taking into account the potential challenges posed by unforeseen circumstances like pandemics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Enhance subject selection and engagement:** Address the concerns raised by students who expressed a lack of interest in LCA subjects. Explore ways to make subjects more engaging, relevant, and appealing to students, potentially through the inclusion of more diverse subject options.

- **Foster student autonomy:** Ensure that students have more autonomy in selecting elective modules and designing their individual learning pathways within the LCA programme. Promote a student-centred approach to curriculum design, empowering students to make decisions in their own best interest.

- **Support meaningful work experience:** Continuously improve the work experience component of the LCA programme to provide valuable opportunities for students to develop workplace skills and gain practical knowledge. Consider providing resources and information about workers' rights to meet the needs and interests of young workers.

- **Maintain voluntary nature of Transition Year:** Respect the preferences of students and maintain the voluntary nature of the programme, given the majority opinion against making TY compulsory.

SECTION 2: EXAMINATIONS & PROGRESSION

INTRODUCTION

Section 2 details the experience of Leaving Certificate Applied students surrounding the examination process and the options available to them to advance to higher and further education.

FINDINGS

When asked if students are satisfied with their further education progression options as an LCA student, the responses were as follows:

- 20.9% strongly agreed
- 56.2% agreed
- 17.1% did not have an opinion, or felt neutral toward this statement
- 3.5% disagreed
- 2.3% strongly disagreed

Where there was a 77.1% uptick in students feeling strongly about their progression options regarding further educational opportunities, this is a welcome finding.

When asked to what extent did respondents feel that the system of exams, attendance and tasks accurately reflects the work over the course of the LCA, the answers were:

- 19.4% strongly agreed
- 46.9% agreed
- 24% did not have an opinion, or felt neutral toward this statement
- 5.8% disagreed
- 3.9% strongly disagreed

Similar to the last section of the report, while still in an uptick trend, when it came to the deeper quality and content, this seems to correlate with a lowering of approval ratings, which could suggest that a wider review with a view to overhaul based on student suggestions and stakeholder engagement may be necessary.

When asked if the respondents were considering options following the completion of the LCA they answered as follows:

- 26.1% indicated they are considering a PLC
- 19.1% indicated they are considering a PLC, intending also a Third Level Education
- 28.5% indicated they are considering an apprenticeship
- 17.2% indicated they are considering going straight into the workforce
- 19.5% did not know
- 5.1% indicated other considerations (Such as professional athleticism, creative arts, music, entertainment, and/or considering doing nothing at all, etc.)

CONCLUSION

Based on the survey results, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents are satisfied with their further education progression options as Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) students. Over 77.1% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that they are satisfied with their options for further education. This positive response indicates that the LCA programme provides students with a sense of confidence in their ability to pursue their desired educational pathways beyond second-level education.

However, when examining the extent to which respondents felt that the system of exams, attendance, and tasks accurately reflects the work completed during the LCA, there is a slight decrease in approval ratings. While still in an upward trend, it suggests that a more comprehensive review of the assessment methods and content of the LCA programme may be necessary. It is important to consider student suggestions and engage with stakeholders to ensure the programme accurately reflects the work and skills developed by LCA students.

Regarding post-LCA plans, the survey results highlight the various options being considered by respondents. A significant number of students (26.1%) are considering pursuing a Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) course, while a considerable portion (19.1%) is considering a PLC in addition to third-level education. Additionally, 28.5% are considering apprenticeships, 17.2% are considering entering the workforce directly, and 5.1% have other considerations, such as professional athleticism, creative arts, music, entertainment, or not pursuing any immediate plans. It is essential to provide support and guidance to LCA students in exploring these different options and ensuring they have access to relevant information and resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conduct a comprehensive review of the LCA programme: Based on the slight decrease in approval ratings regarding the assessment methods and content of the LCA programme, it is recommended that the Department of Education conducts a thorough review. Engage with LCA students, educators, and relevant stakeholders to gather feedback and make necessary improvements to ensure the programme accurately reflects the skills and knowledge acquired by students.

- Enhance career guidance and support: Provide comprehensive and up-to-date career guidance to LCA students, highlighting the various post-LCA options available to them. Collaborate with career counsellors and industry professionals to ensure students have access to relevant information about apprenticeships, PLC courses, third-level education, and other potential career paths.

- **Strengthen connections with further education institutions and employers:** Foster stronger connections between LCA students and further education institutions, such as PLC colleges and apprenticeship programmes. Collaborate with employers to create work experience opportunities and apprenticeships aligned with the skills developed through the LCA programme. This will provide students with clearer pathways to their desired career choices.

- **Promote flexibility and individualised learning pathways:** Recognise and support the diverse interests and aspirations of LCA students. Encourage flexibility in the programme to allow students to pursue their passions and talents, whether it be in sports, creative arts, music, or other fields. Provide opportunities for personalised learning pathways that cater to individual strengths and career goals.

- **Continue to evaluate and improve the LCA programme:** Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the LCA programme through surveys, feedback sessions, and ongoing engagement with LCA students and educators. Implement necessary adjustments and improvements to ensure the programme remains relevant, engaging, and provides valuable educational opportunities for students.

SECTION 3: ATTITUDES TOWARDS LCA

INTRODUCTION

This section highlights the attitudes towards the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme as felt by students. This takes into account their school environment and the wider society.

FINDINGS

When asked how much value their school places on the LCA the results were:
- 35.6% a lot of value
- 41% a moderate amount of value
- 10.1% a little value
- 9% very little value
- 4.3% no value

The results indicate a largely positive uptick in acceptance and positive embrace of the LCA among the school's professional environment, which is a welcome factor. With less than 14% having a negative downward trend. This means that there is still work to be done in order to shift perception, but indicates it is going, largely, in the right direction.

When asked how much value society places on the LCA the results were as follows:

- 5.9% a lot of value
- 23.5% a moderate amount of value
- 25.5% a little value
- 26.6% very little value
- 18.4% no value

The results of the above question is quite worrying such a large proportion, shy of nearly half of all respondents, have conclude that society does not value the LCA. This no doubt has a profound effect on students going forward.

When asked how respondents felts other students viewed the LCA, the results were as follows:
- 10.5% very positively
- 21.4% somewhat positively
- 21.8% neutral
- 28.8% somewhat negatively
- 17.5% very negatively

When asked if there were further comments from respondents, their responses were quite upsetting to see from any student where they are fuelled by confusion, disappointment and dismay whereby:

- An extraordinary large proportion of comments indicate that peers view LCA students as lazy, less intelligent, less developed and lacking maturity.
- Some respondents have been referred to as 'the stupid class'.
- Some respondents felt belittled by other teachers, peers and the wider society by actions, words or sentiments.

The above is a very alarming find, showcasing that there is a lot of work to be done in this area. It is simply unnecessary and burdensome to those in the LCA programme that this continues, and the ISSU has serious concerns regarding the consequences of this on students' wellbeing and mental health.

CONCLUSION

The survey results regarding the perception of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme reveal both positive and concerning trends. While the majority of respondents reported that their schools place value on the LCA programme, with 76.6% indicating either a lot or a moderate amount of value, there is still a significant proportion (23.4%) who perceive a little to no value being placed on the LCA. This indicates the need for continued efforts to raise awareness and recognition of the programme's merits among school administrations.

However, when it comes to the value society places on the LCA, the results are more concerning. A significant proportion of respondents (71.5%) reported that society places little to no value on the LCA. This disparity between the perceived value within schools and society at large is disheartening and highlights the need for broader advocacy and awareness campaigns to change societal perceptions and foster a greater appreciation for the LCA and its students' achievements.

Moreover, when asked about how other students view the LCA, the results indicate a significant number of respondents feeling negatively judged. Over 46% of respondents reported that other students view LCA students either somewhat or very negatively. The additional comments provided by respondents reveal a distressing reality where LCA students are subjected to derogatory labels, belittlement, and unfair judgments. This kind of treatment can have detrimental effects on students' self-esteem, well-being, and mental health.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Raise awareness and promote understanding: The Department of Education should launch a comprehensive awareness campaign to educate schools, students, parents, and the wider community about the value and benefits of the LCA programme. Highlight the unique skills and strengths that LCA students develop, emphasising their contributions to the workforce and society.

- Encourage inclusivity and respect: Foster a culture of inclusivity and respect within schools to combat negative stereotypes and prejudices against LCA students. Implement initiatives that promote empathy, understanding, and appreciation for the diverse educational pathways available to students. Encourage peer support programmes and engage in activities that celebrate the achievements of LCA students.

- Provide continued professional development: Offer professional development opportunities, ensuring a supportive and inclusive environment for all students.

- **Collaborate with students:** Partner with the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU) to amplify student voices, address concerns, and develop joint initiatives that promote respect and recognition for the LCA programme. Engage students in the decision-making processes and policy development to ensure their perspectives are taken into account.

- **Prioritise student well-being:** Implement comprehensive well-being programmes that focus on mental health support, resilience building, and combating bullying and discrimination. Create safe spaces within schools where LCA students can express themselves, receive support, and develop a sense of belonging. Teachers and school staff to enhance their understanding of the LCA programme and its students' needs.

SECTION 4: MENTAL HEALTH AND STUDENT WELLBEING

INTRODUCTION

This section shows the different experiences LCA students have faced in relation to their mental health and wellbeing and the attitudes towards LCA students' mental health.

FINDINGS

When asked **to** what extent the academic work and/or prospect of the assessments during the LCA programme had a negative impact on their mental health, the results were as follows:

- 37.9% said no impact
- 26.2% said mild impact
- 18.4% said moderate impact
- 5.7% said severe impact
- 11.7% chose not to answer

While more than 50% of respondents felt little to no impact, it is important to recognise there is over one fifth of respondents who noted a moderate to severe impact which is reflective of intense examination processes.

When asked to rate their quality of education regarding mental health and wellbeing in school, respondents felt that:

- 19.7% felt it was very good
- 32.7% felt it was good
- 29.9% felt it was neutral
- 9.5% felt it was poor
- 8.3% felt it was very poor

Given the results of the previous question, and taking into account the above answers, it may be pertinent to explore improving mental health education through resilience, mindfulness and proper education on accessing supports as well as verbalising the need for support.

When asked on average what they thought of the level of mental health supports had respondents received during the LCA in school, the survey found:

- 17.3% felt it was very good
- 34.5% felt it was good
- 27.8% felt neutrally
- 12.9% felt it was poor
- 7.5% felt it was very poor

When given the opportunity to add further comments some respondents felt that the schools were not well enough equipped to deal with requests for help or advice to seek where to get help.

Students when referencing the teachers that are supportive, have gone above and beyond to support students and they spoke extensively about their positive feelings towards those teachers and reinforced how important their support and openness allows them to feel supported, which may influence some of the results above.

CONCLUSION

The survey results regarding the impact of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme on students' mental health highlight both positive and concerning findings. While a significant portion of respondents (37.9%) reported no impact on their mental health due to academic work and assessments during the LCA, it is crucial to acknowledge that over one-fifth of respondents (24.3%) experienced a moderate to severe negative impact. This emphasises the need for comprehensive support systems to address the mental health challenges students may face during the LCA.

When rating the quality of education on mental health and well-being in schools, the majority of respondents (52.4%) felt it was either good or very good. However, a concerning number of respondents (18%) rated the quality as poor or very poor. This indicates the importance of enhancing mental health education within schools, focusing on building resilience, providing mindfulness training, and ensuring students are equipped with knowledge on accessing support services.

Furthermore, the survey results revealed mixed perceptions of the level of mental health support received during the LCA in schools. While a considerable proportion of respondents (51.8%) rated the support as good or very good, a significant number (20.4%) felt the support was poor or very poor. Additional comments from respondents highlighted the lack of preparedness among schools to address mental health concerns, including difficulties in accessing help and inconsistent support from teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Enhance mental health education: Integrate comprehensive mental health education into the curriculum, focusing on building resilience, stress management, and providing students with tools to seek help and support. This should be an ongoing effort throughout the LCA programme, supporting students' mental well-being.

- Provide professional development: Offer training programmes for teachers to equip them with the knowledge and skills to support students' mental health effectively. Training should include understanding common mental health challenges, early identification of signs of distress, and appropriate referral pathways.

- **Strengthen support systems:** Improve the availability and accessibility of mental health supports within schools. This includes ensuring clear pathways for students to seek help, providing on-site counselling services, and establishing partnerships with external mental health organisations to enhance support options.

- **Foster a supportive school culture:** Create a positive and supportive school environment that promotes open conversations about mental health. Encourage schools to prioritise mental well-being as a key aspect of students' overall development, reinforcing the importance of empathy, understanding, and destigmatisation.

- **Recognise and support teachers:** Acknowledge and support teachers who go above and beyond to provide meaningful support to students. Offer professional development opportunities specifically focused on mental health support, ensuring that teachers have the necessary resources and guidance to fulfil their duty of care effectively.

SECTION 5: SUBJECTS

TECHNOLOGY

SCIENCE
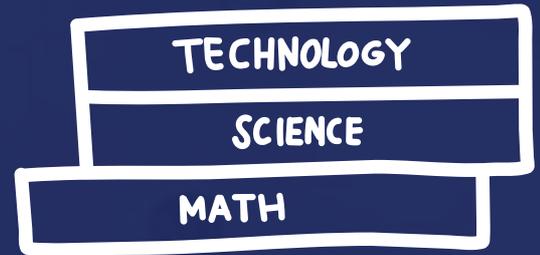
MATH

INTRODUCTION

Section 5 explores all examined subjects within the LCA curriculum. These subjects include English and Communication, Gaeilge Chumarsáideach, Mathematical Applications, Language and Social Education.

When given the opportunity to engage with individual questions regarding specific elements of English and Communication, from the full pool of questions, each being out of 100% the survey found (with rounding not used in these results), the results outlined below emerged.

FINDINGS

English and Communication

- 28.02% felt that the course should be narrower and more detailed
- 20.69% felt that the course should be broader and less detailed
- 22.84% felt that the course has adequate opportunities for students to become involved in communications projects. (Interviews, formal meetings, school newsletters, exhibitions)
- 8.62% felt that the course does not have adequate opportunities for students to become involved in communications projects. (Interviews, formal meetings, school newsletters, exhibitions)
- 27.16% felt that the course encourages self-expression and creativity
- 8.62% felt that this course does not encourage self-expression and creativity
- 13.36% felt that Module 3 (communications media) should be re-evaluated to suit modern use
- 4.74% felt that Module 3 (communications media) focuses too much on traditional media
- 10.78% felt that Module 3 (communications media) should focus more on more modern media

- 28.45% felt that this courses helps to develop communication skills
- 6.47% felt that this course does not help to develop communication skills
- 15.09% felt that this course helps with resolving communicative conflict
- 3.88% felt that this course does not help with resolving communicative conflict
- 15.52% felt that this course improved my vocabulary to a high standard
- 9.91% felt that this course did not improve my vocabulary to a high standard
- 21.55% felt that this course helped with expressing opinions in writing
- 6.03% felt that this course did not help with expressing opinions in writing
- 12.93% felt that (Module 2) this course helps to have a good understanding of communication in enterprise
- 3.45% felt that (Module 2) this course does not help to have a good understanding of communication in enterprise
- 17.67% felt that this course adequately helps with job interviews
- 4.31% felt that this course inadequately helps with job interviews
- 10.78% felt that the texts (novels etc) studied should be more modern
- 7.76% felt that the texts (novels etc) studied are satisfactory
- 1.72% felt that the exam should be longer
- 19.83% felt that the exam should be shorter
- 18.97% felt that the exam should have more time
- 7.33% felt that the exam should have less time

Gaeilge Chumarsáideach

- 8.29% felt that the course should be longer
- 27.62% felt that the course should be shorter
- 13.81% felt that the course should have more time
- 11.6% felt that the exam should have less time
- 18.23% felt that the exam should have more choice
- 7.18% felt that the exam should have less choice
- 21.55% felt that the course should have more practical elements to it
- 6.63% felt that the course should be completely theory based
- 18.23% felt that the course should have more choice
- 14.36% felt that the course should have less choice

Mathematical Applications

- 10.22% felt that the course should be longer
- 26.67% felt that the course should be shorter
- 16.89% felt that the course should have more time
- 6.67% felt that the exam should have less time
- 9.33% felt that the exam should have more choice
- 4% felt that the exam should have less choice
- 14.22% felt that the course should have more practical elements to it
- 2.22% felt that the course should be completely theory based
- 7.56% felt that the course should have more choice
- 2.22% felt that the course should have less choice

Language

- 43.32% felt that the course should not be compulsory
- 12.44% felt that the course should be shorter
- 7.83% felt that the course should be longer
- 7.37% felt that the course should be more narrow and detailed
- 3.69% felt that the course should be more broader and less detailed
- 7.83% felt that the course should offer optional modules
- 6.45% felt that the exam paper should not contain an aural
- 1.38% felt that the exam paper should contain an aural
- 0.46% felt that the exam should have less time
- 3.23% felt that the exam should have more time
- 5.99% felt that the exam paper should offer more choice

Social Education

- 16.89% felt that the subject should not be compulsory
- 17.78% felt that the course should be shorter
- 10.22% felt that the course should be longer
- 8.89% felt that the course should be more narrow and detailed
- 11.56% felt that the course should be broader and less detailed
- 1.78% felt that the course should have more emphasis on modules taken under Contemporary Issues
- 14.22% felt that the course should have more emphasis on the modules taken under Social and Mental Health

- 4.44% felt that the course should offer optional modules
- 3.11% felt that the exam should not contain an aural
- 0.44% felt that the exam should contain an aural
- 3.56% felt that the exam should have more time
- 2.22% felt that the exam should have less time
- 4.89% felt that the exam should offer more choice

When asked overall, regarding opinions, students voiced that they would like more autonomy in the design of their curriculum, however fear that due to societally perceived negative opinions of them, that they will not be consulted or are afraid to speak out, but feel confident in their ability to do so. Students have also voiced a desire to modernise their overall experience, bringing more technology and modern references into the way the LCA is operated as opposed to traditional resources which are not suitable to their learning preferences.

- In English and Communications students enjoyed open dialogues with in-depth thought provoking conversations that would draw on what was learned. However some felt that it didn't prepare them for working life and could not draw similarities among them.

- In Gaeilge Chumarsáideach many students had exemptions from the language or did not engage with it. Students who had a strong interest and background in Irish felt the subject to be engaging, however, the overall tone was a very strong desire in a new and engaging, stimulating way to encourage students to seize their culture.

- In Mathematical Applications, students felt that the subject matter was easy to understand to an extent and once applied themselves, gained an understanding into the concepts being discussed, however feedback indicates that there is a desire for more practical day-to-day examples to conclude learning sessions in order to cement ideas thought within the classroom. There was a desire to not overwhelm students also with a strong desire from students to have shorter learning sessions in this area.

- In Language, students felt that it was really important and insightful to learn about other cultures through languages however, there was a strong reaction indicating a desire for this to be optional with more choices available to students with many people finding the languages very interesting, but very difficult to grasp and cement in learning.

- Finally in Social Education, there was a strong indication that this was a key area of learning that was also beneficial and rudimentary learning requirements going forward, some of the most positive reflections were evident in this segment of feedback, however the negative feedback left a strong desire for easier-to-digest concepts, less projects and shorter class times, indicating that while the content is useful, the execution of the content can sometimes be inaccessible to students.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the survey results shed light on various aspects of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme and highlights students' opinions and desires for improvements. Students expressed a strong desire for more autonomy in designing their curriculum, but many feared that negative societal perceptions might hinder their input. They also emphasised the need to modernise the overall LCA experience by incorporating technology and contemporary references to align with their learning preferences.

In English and Communications, students appreciated open dialogues and thought-provoking conversations but felt that the subject lacked practical relevance for future work.

In Gaeilge Chumarsáideach (Irish), students with a strong interest in the language found it engaging, but overall, there was a strong desire for a more stimulating and innovative approach that encouraged students to embrace their culture.

In Mathematical Applications, students found the subject understandable but expressed a need for more practical, day-to-day examples to solidify their understanding. They also desired shorter learning sessions to prevent overwhelming them.

In Language studies, students valued learning about other cultures but expressed difficulty in grasping and retaining the languages, suggesting a desire for optional language choices and more accessible learning methods.

Regarding Social Education, students recognized its importance and found it beneficial, but they desired easier-to-digest concepts, fewer projects, and shorter class times. This indicates that while the content is valuable, the execution can sometimes be challenging for students.

RECOMENDATIONS

- **Promote student involvement:** Create avenues for student input in curriculum design to address their desire for more autonomy and ensure their voices are heard and valued.

- **Modernise the learning experience:** Incorporate technology and contemporary references into the LCA programme to align with students' learning preferences and enhance engagement.

- **Enhance practical relevance:** Integrate practical, real-life examples and applications into subjects like English & Communications and Mathematical Applications to better prepare students for future work and daily life.

- **Innovate language learning:** Offer a wider range of language choices and explore innovative teaching methods to make language learning more engaging, accessible, and enjoyable for students.

- **Optimise Social Education:** Streamline concepts, reduce project workload, and consider shorter class times to make the content more digestible and accessible without compromising its educational value.

REPORT CONCLUSION

The majority of respondents have a positive perception of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, with high agreement on its encouragement of creativity, curiosity, and engagement. However, there is a concern about students' lack of interest in certain subjects, indicating a need to address this issue and enhance student engagement. Overall, students enjoy participating in the LCA programme itself, but some feel limited in their choice of elective modules, highlighting the need for a student-centred approach to curriculum design. Transition Year (TY) is not widely chosen, and most respondents prefer to keep it as a voluntary program. Work experience is valued but impacted by COVID-19, and students express a preference for consistent, ongoing work rather than a large block of time.

Overall, LCA students are satisfied with their options for further education. However, there is a slight decrease in approval ratings regarding how the assessment methods and content of the LCA programme reflect students' work. Various options are considered for post-LCA plans, including PLC courses, third-level education, apprenticeships, and entering the workforce directly. Support and guidance are necessary to help students explore these options effectively.

While most respondents feel their schools place value on the LCA programme, a significant proportion perceive little to no value being placed on it by society. Respondents also reported negative judgments from other students towards LCA students, indicating the need to address derogatory treatment and foster greater appreciation for the programme's achievements'.

The impact of the LCA programme on students' mental health varies, with some reporting no impact and others experiencing a negative impact. The quality of mental health education in schools receives mixed ratings, highlighting the need for improvements. The level of mental health support during the LCA is rated differently, with some students feeling well-supported and others reporting poor support or difficulties accessing help.

Students desire more autonomy in curriculum design and suggest modernising the LCA experience with technology and contemporary references. In specific subjects, students appreciate open dialogues in English and Communications but desire more practical relevance. In Gaeilge Chumarsáideach, students want a more stimulating approach that embraces their culture. In Mathematical Applications, students seek more practical examples and shorter learning sessions. Language studies present challenges in grasping and retaining languages, indicating a desire for optional language choices and accessible learning methods. Social Education is recognised as important but requires easier-to-digest concepts, fewer projects, and shorter class times.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Curriculum

- **Enhance subject selection and engagement:** Address the concerns raised by students who expressed a lack of interest in LCA subjects. Explore ways to make subjects more engaging, relevant, and appealing to students, potentially through the inclusion of more diverse subject options.

- **Foster student autonomy:** Ensure that students have more autonomy in selecting elective modules and designing their individual learning pathways within the LCA programme. Promote a student-centred approach to curriculum design, empowering students to make decisions in their own best interest.

- **Support meaningful work experience:** Continuously improve the work experience component of the LCA programme to provide valuable opportunities for students to develop workplace skills and gain practical knowledge. Consider providing resources and information about workers' rights to meet the needs and interests of young workers.

- **Maintain voluntary nature of Transition Year:** Respect the preferences of students and maintain the voluntary nature of the programme, given the majority opinion against making TY compulsory.

Examination Process and continuation to Higher & Further Education

- **Conduct a comprehensive review of the LCA programme:** Based on the slight decrease in approval ratings regarding the assessment methods and content of the LCA programme, it is recommended that the Department of Education conducts a thorough review. Engage with LCA students, educators, and relevant stakeholders to gather feedback and make necessary improvements to ensure the programme accurately reflects the skills and knowledge acquired by students.

- **Enhance career guidance and support:** Provide comprehensive and up-to-date career guidance to LCA students, highlighting the various post-LCA options available to them. Collaborate with career counsellors and industry professionals to ensure students have access to relevant information about apprenticeships, PLC courses, third-level education, and other potential career paths.

- **Strengthen connections with further education institutions and employers:** Foster stronger connections between LCA students and further education institutions, such as PLC colleges and apprenticeship programmes. Collaborate with employers to create work experience opportunities and apprenticeships aligned with the skills developed through the LCA programme. This will provide students with clearer pathways to their desired career choices.

- **Promote flexibility and individualised learning pathways:** Recognise and support the diverse interests and aspirations of LCA students. Encourage flexibility in the programme to allow students to pursue their passions and talents, whether it be in sports, creative arts, music, or other fields. Provide opportunities for personalised learning pathways that cater to individual strengths and career goals.

- **Continue to evaluate and improve the LCA programme:** Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the LCA programme through surveys, feedback sessions, and ongoing engagement with LCA students and educators. Implement necessary adjustments and improvements to ensure the programme remains relevant, engaging, and provides valuable educational opportunities for students.

Attitudes towards LCA

- **Raise awareness and promote understanding:** The Department of Education should launch a comprehensive awareness campaign to educate schools, students, parents, and the wider community about the value and benefits of the LCA programme. Highlight the unique skills and strengths that LCA students develop, emphasising their contributions to the workforce and society.

- **Encourage inclusivity and respect:** Foster a culture of inclusivity and respect within schools to combat negative stereotypes and prejudices against LCA students. Implement initiatives that promote empathy, understanding, and appreciation for the diverse educational pathways available to students. Encourage peer support programmes and engage in activities that celebrate the achievements of LCA students.

- **Provide training and support for educators:** Offer professional development opportunities, ensuring a supportive and inclusive environment for all students.

- **Collaborate with students:** Partner with the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU) to amplify student voices, address concerns, and develop joint initiatives that promote respect and recognition for the LCA programme. Engage students in the decision-making processes and policy development to ensure their perspectives are taken into account.

- **Prioritise student well-being:** Implement comprehensive well-being programmes that focus on mental health support, resilience building, and combating bullying and discrimination. Create safe spaces within schools where LCA students can express themselves, receive support, and develop a sense of belonging. teachers and school staff to enhance their understanding of the LCA programme and its students' needs.

Mental health and student wellbeing

- **Enhance mental health education:** Integrate comprehensive mental health education into the curriculum, focusing on building resilience, stress management, and providing students with tools to seek help and support. This should be an ongoing effort throughout the LCA programme, supporting students' mental well-being.

- **Provide professional development:** Offer training programmes for teachers to equip them with the knowledge and skills to support students' mental health effectively. Training should include understanding common mental health challenges, early identification of signs of distress, and appropriate referral pathways.

- **Strengthen support systems:** Improve the availability and accessibility of mental health supports within schools. This includes ensuring clear pathways for students to seek help, providing on-site counselling services, and establishing partnerships with external mental health organisations to enhance support options.

- **Foster a supportive school culture:** Create a positive and supportive school environment that promotes open conversations about mental health. Encourage schools to prioritise mental well-being as a key aspect of students' overall development, reinforcing the importance of empathy, understanding, and destigmatisation.

- **Recognise and support teachers:** Acknowledge and support teachers who go above and beyond to provide meaningful support to students. Offer professional development opportunities specifically focused on mental health support, ensuring that teachers have the necessary resources and guidance to fulfil their duty of care effectively.

Specific Subject Questions

- **Promote student involvement:** Create avenues for student input in curriculum design to address their desire for more autonomy and ensure their voices are heard and valued.

- **Modernise the learning experience:** Incorporate technology and contemporary references into the LCA programme to align with students' learning preferences and enhance engagement.

- **Enhance practical relevance:** Integrate practical, real-life examples and applications into subjects like English & Communications and Mathematical Applications to better prepare students for future work and daily life.

- **Innovate language learning:** Offer a wider range of language choices and explore innovative teaching methods to make language learning more engaging, accessible, and enjoyable for students.

- **Optimise Social Education:** Streamline concepts, reduce project workload, and consider shorter class times to make the content more digestible and accessible without compromising its educational value.

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