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**ENGAGING YOUNG
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STUDENT
EXPERIENCES OF
THE LEAVING
CERTIFICATE
APPLIED
PROGRAMME**

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

| | |
|-------|--|
| CAO | Central Applications Office |
| ECDL | European Computer Driving Licence |
| FÁS | Foras Áiseanna Saothair, Training and Employment Authority |
| FETAC | Further Education and Training Awards Council |
| HETAC | Higher Education and Training Awards Council |
| ISCED | International Standard Classification of Education |
| I TEC | International Therapy Examination Council |
| IVET | Initial Vocational Education and Training |
| LCA | Leaving Certificate Applied |
| LCE | Leaving Certificate Established |
| LCVP | Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme |
| NCVA | National Council for Vocational Awards |
| PLC | Post Leaving Certificate |
| SEC | State Examinations Commission |
| SLS | School Leavers' Survey |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Whether to have a comprehensive schooling system or to provide different tracks or curricular programmes has been a central focus of international policy debates on second-level education. The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) was introduced in 1995 as an alternative to the established Leaving Certificate and was designed as a distinct self-contained pre-vocational programme for senior cycle students. Its fundamental goal is to prepare students for the transition from the world of education to that of adult and working life (DES/NCCA, 2004), including further education (DES, 1995). Little is known about the process of curriculum differentiation in an Irish setting and in particular the characteristics of young people who opt for the LCA programme. This study provides a unique opportunity to examine student experiences prior to entering the LCA, their curriculum and learning experiences during the programme, and their post-school outcomes. Adopting a mixed methods approach, this study uses data from a range of sources including the School Leavers' Survey and the Post-Primary Longitudinal Survey in addition to in-depth qualitative interviews with young people who had participated in LCA. The contribution of both quantitative and qualitative research strategies provides greater insight into the views of LCA students and their experiences of the programme.

Curriculum differentiation and the process of tracking or sorting students according to 'ability' has been a main focus of educational research internationally. Existing analyses of such tracking generally employ one of two competing theories: human capital theory and social reproduction theory. Human capital theory views vocational education as an investment in young people in preparation for the labour market or as a safety-net which retains 'at risk' young people within the educational system and enhances their later employment opportunities. In contrast, theories of social reproduction view the provision of a differentiated curriculum as a system which socialises working-class people into subordinate roles and reproduces social inequalities across generations.

Approaches to curriculum differentiation vary internationally according to a number of factors, including the age at which students are placed in differing ability tracks, the strength of linkages between vocational education and the labour market, and whether programmes provide students with occupationally specific skills or generic work-related skills. Countries such as Austria and Germany track students at a young age into programmes which often have strong employer linkages and specific vocational skills training. In contrast, other educational systems (including Canada, Japan, Norway, Sweden, England and the US) tend not to track students until senior cycle level and provide more generic workplace skills. Ireland is considered to have an intermediate position in terms of having a mix of both academic and vocational curriculum (Iannelli and Raffe 2007)

and the LCA programme can be considered as ‘pre-vocational’ with an emphasis on generic rather than specific skills.

Summary of Findings

LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED PROVISION AND TAKE-UP

The decision to provide the LCA programme rests with individual schools which can apply for approval from the Department of Education and Science. The proportion of schools providing LCA has increased in recent years from 15 per cent of second-level schools in 1997 to 42 per cent in 2007. The provision of LCA appears to relate to the perceived suitability of the programme for a school’s student intake. Across schools, provision varies considerably with over 70 per cent of community/comprehensive schools providing the LCA programme compared to 40 per cent of the vocational sector and 30 per cent of voluntary secondary schools. In addition, larger schools, English medium schools and disadvantaged status (DEIS) schools are more likely to provide the programme. The LCA programme is generally provided in addition to the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and/or the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), with very few second-level schools providing only the LCA at senior cycle level.

Approximately 7 per cent of the Leaving Certificate cohort takes the LCA. In schools providing the LCA, the level of take-up varies widely but averages at 23 per cent of the senior cycle cohort. The high take-up schools tend to be vocational schools, smaller schools, and disadvantaged schools, as well as schools in Dublin.

PATHWAYS INTO THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED

Our findings show LCA participants have quite a distinctive profile compared to students entering other Leaving Certificate programmes. The reproduction of social class inequalities is apparent as students are more likely to be from working-class or non-employed backgrounds. In addition, LCA take-up is strongly related to low reading and Maths ability on entry into first year of second-level education. Ability grouping during junior cycle is also related to LCA entry with over four in ten of those from the lower streamed classes going on to take the programme. This study found that the LCA caters for a diverse group of students with differing educational expectations and aspirations. Using multiple data sources, a number of pathways into LCA were identified, including: those who struggle with school work in junior cycle; those who experience behavioural problems at junior cycle; those who wish to enter the labour market when they leave school; those with special needs or learning difficulties; and those who felt ‘misdirected’ by the school into taking the programme.

CURRICULUM AND THE LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED

The study shows that the teaching and learning methodologies used in the LCA help re-engage young people with the education process and foster more positive attitudes to school. Study respondents were extremely positive about their learning experiences in the LCA, in particular the active teaching methods and student-centred approach to learning. Group and project work, credit accumulation over time, smaller class sizes and greater individual attention from their teachers all emerged as positives aspects of

LCA. In addition, young people were positive about the work experience element of the LCA in forming their career aspirations, improving confidence and decision making skills, and preparing them for the world of work.

The study also revealed, however, issues around lack of challenge and limited subject choice in the LCA. Some young people felt that the LCA curriculum, in particular Maths and English, was too easy and repetitive of junior cycle subject content.

As the LCA specifically targets young people at risk of dropping out, it is not perhaps surprising that a significantly higher rate of students do not complete the LCA when compared with the LCE/LCVP cohort. Available data do not allow us to assess the net impact of taking part in LCA on early school leaving. However, for many of the young people interviewed, the LCA appears to have acted as a safety-net by retaining young people in the school system, with many feeling they would not have been able to complete the LCE/LCVP.

POST-SCHOOL OUTCOMES FOR LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED LEAVERS

Looking at how LCA leavers fare relative to other groups of leavers means that we must clarify the appropriate comparison group. Some of the group may have dropped out prior to Leaving Certificate level if the LCA had not been available and so LCA leavers can be compared with Junior Certificate leavers. Others may have taken LCE or LCVP but achieved lower grades and so can be compared with lower-performing LCE/LCVP leavers. This study allows us to compare the post-school outcomes of LCA students with both Junior Certificate and LCE/LCVP students across a range of performance levels by examining their status one year after leaving school, their risk of unemployment, and the industrial and occupational sector they enter in the labour market.

The study shows that LCA leavers are more likely to be in the labour market one year after leaving school and are less likely than other school leavers to be in full-time education and training. Where they do enter education and training, the typical route for young women is a PLC course while young men tend to enter apprenticeships. Furthermore, LCA labour market entrants are found to be at greater risk of unemployment in the immediate post-school period compared with LCE/LCVP labour market entrants. LCA leavers are similar to the lowest performing LCE/LCVP group in terms of the industrial and occupational sectors they enter, with young men commonly working in the construction sector and young women employed in personal service jobs. The gendered nature of the sectors and occupations entered can be seen as reflecting, at least in part, the courses available in the LCA curriculum.

**Implications
for Policy
Development**

The study raises a number of issues for policy, both in terms of the relationship between LCA and the rest of the second-level system and in terms of more specific issues for the future development of the LCA programme.

STUDENT EXPERIENCES AT JUNIOR CYCLE

Entry processes into LCA must be seen in the wider context of student learning experiences during junior cycle. Negative academic and school experiences in junior cycle can influence the decision to enter the LCA programme. This study suggests that more active teaching methodologies at junior cycle, which foster student motivation and address issues of disengagement, may in fact reduce the need for a differentiated programme such as the LCA at senior cycle, especially if there were curriculum changes in the LCE/LCVP.

PERSONALISED LEARNING

The study shows that the LCA attracts a distinct social profile of young people who are predominantly working class, from lower streamed classes, have lower educational and occupational aspirations, and have experienced disengagement from school during junior cycle. The ring-fenced nature of the programme facilitates the process of social reproduction as students often feel excluded and in some cases segregated from other Leaving Certificate groups. Introducing greater flexibility and communication between Leaving Certificate programmes and providing students with the option of a more personalised Leaving Certificate with increased subject choice could address some of these issues while improving the profile of LCA among the wider student body.

INTERACTIVE TEACHING METHODS

It is clear that junior cycle and other senior cycle programmes could learn much from the positive aspects of the LCA programme. Young people are positive about the LCA's interactive teaching methods and student-centred learning and many believed this enhanced their confidence and self-esteem, resulting in a more positive opinion of education. Young people also recognised the value of the LCA's work experience component in their career decision making which raises questions about its potential value for other Leaving Certificate groups.

CLARITY OF INFORMATION AND IMPROVED GUIDANCE

This study highlights more specific issues for the development of the LCA relating to student entry and recruitment into the programme, the LCA curriculum, and problems of accreditation and recognition by third-level institutions and employers. Recruitment policies and the ways in which students enter the LCA vary significantly across schools. This may be the result of a lack of clear objectives for the LCA which is then open to different interpretation by schools, parents and students. Issues around lack of transparency and guidance could be addressed within schools so that students could be clearly informed of the differences between the LCA and the LCE/LCVP. In particular, students should be made aware of the potential limitations of the LCA qualification in accessing certain types of post-school education and employment.

CURRICULUM CHALLENGE AND SUBJECT CHOICE

The study shows that some areas of the LCA curriculum do not appear to foster student potential. Lack of challenge in subjects such as English and Maths and the size of the gap in standards between LCA and LCE/LCVP subjects emerged as issues among young people who had participated in LCA. Findings also highlight how the gendered nature of the LCA curriculum and participation in traditional 'male' and 'female' vocational subjects such as Childcare and Construction tends to influence the occupational and educational sectors which young people enter.

ACCREDITATION AND GRADING

Further debate and clarification is needed around grading and accreditation of the LCA, particularly for those wishing to access third-level courses. The awareness and profile of the LCA, its lack of recognition for direct entry to third-level institutions and its exclusion from the CAO points system could be addressed through increasing flexibility between programmes, allowing CAO points to be awarded to LCA students and providing a more personalised Leaving Certificate.

1. THE POLICY BACKGROUND TO THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED PROGRAMME

1.1 Introduction

Whether to incorporate all young people into a comprehensive school system or to divide them into different educational ‘tracks’ has been a crucial issue for educational policy internationally. The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme was introduced in Ireland in 1995 in order to provide an alternative qualification to the established Leaving Certificate at senior cycle level. However, little is known about the development and progress of the programme over time. Dramatic changes in the economic conditions and educational opportunities facing young people during the period since its inception makes the need for systematic research on the programme even more relevant today. Previous research in Ireland on the LCA has focused on school context and the impact of school cultural and organisational factors on the LCA (Gleeson *et al.*, 2002). Relatively little is known, however, about the characteristics of young people who participate in LCA, their learning experiences and post-school pathways into further study and/or labour market integration. Moreover, there is a lack of information about the profile of the schools offering LCA and the take-up of LCA in these schools.

This report provides a unique insight into LCA student experiences by analysing their entry into, participation in, and progression from the LCA programme. It investigates the LCA’s mix of general and vocational curriculum, including work experience and other aspects, intended to prepare young people for adult and working life. In addition, it analyses the practical task-oriented nature of the programme and alternative teaching approaches used to establish whether students, who have experienced academic and/or social difficulties during the junior cycle, re-engage with school and whether the programme plays a role in student retention.

In doing so, the project adopted a mixed methods research approach, using nationally representative data sources such as the School Leavers’ Surveys and other key longitudinal sources such as the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) as well as qualitative interviews with young people who had participated in the LCA programme.

This chapter outlines the policy context within which the LCA was introduced. It begins by providing an overview of the LCA programme and the Irish educational system, drawing parallels with programmes that have preceded but were somewhat similar to LCA in the past. The chapter then considers theoretical arguments relating to curriculum differentiation in the sociology of education and the final section discusses the research questions addressed in the study.

1.2 An Overview of the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme

The LCA was introduced in 1995 and developed by the National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA) and the Department of Education and Science (DES). Established as a distinct self-contained programme that offers students an ‘alternative’ to the established Leaving Certificate, the LCA is a two-year programme, designed to have an innovative modular form of course structure which is completely different to that of the Established Leaving Certificate (LCE) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). A key aim of the LCA is ‘...to meet the needs of those students who are not adequately catered for by other Leaving Certificate programmes or who choose not to opt for such programmes...’ (DES/NCCA 2000, p. 6). Furthermore, its mix of academic and vocational curriculum aims ‘...to prepare students for the transition from school to adult and working life, including further education...’ (DES, 1995 p. 54). The inclusion of continuing and further education within its remit was a key departure from other vocationally-orientated programmes provided in the past. DES Circulars have explicitly stated that ‘...on successful completion of the Leaving Certificate Applied, students may progress to further education through Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses...’ but that ‘...in general, direct access to the university sector is not possible...’ (DES, 2009).

In senior cycle, the majority of students take the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) which is a two-year programme, incorporating a range of distinct subjects. Students normally study 6 or 7 subjects during the senior cycle but must take at least 5 Leaving Certificate subjects in their examinations. Another option for students is the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) which overlaps with the LCE while also providing three compulsory link modules on enterprise education, preparation for work and work experience. The LCA differs significantly from the other Leaving Certificate programmes in terms of structure, design, content, teaching methodologies and assessment (for a detailed description of the LCA see Appendix 1). Its primary aim is to develop students’ understanding, self-esteem, self-knowledge and sense of responsibility.

In recognition of its different character, resource allocation is different for the LCA programme than for LCE. In the school year 2008/9, schools were allocated 1.5 whole-time teacher equivalents for the first group of 20 students and 1.25 whole-time teacher equivalents for each group of 20 students thereafter. Schools providing the LCA also received an annual resource grant which was calculated on the basis of €158.72 per LCA pupil (DES, 2008). Schools introducing LCA (and/or LCVP) could avail of once-off grants for the purchase of equipment for the programme. Budgetary changes in November 2008 resulted in the curtailment of supports for schools offering the LCA programme. Specific grants for LCA were cut and the allocation of teachers reduced to 1.4 whole-time equivalents for the first 20 students. In the Renewed Programme for Government, cuts in grants for LCA were rescinded but it is unclear

whether changes in teacher allocation for LCA will be reversed. At the time of writing (November, 2009), it is too soon to gain any sense of the extent to which provision and take-up of LCA is changing in response to budgetary changes. The broader impact of the current economic situation will be discussed in Chapter 9.

For a programme in place for over a decade it is remarkable that so little is known of the characteristics of young people who pursue the LCA or the types of schools that provide the programme. To date the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study has indicated that the main rationale for school provision of LCA is the desire to increase (or maintain) student attendance and retention within the school, and that the programme is generally targeted at students who have experienced difficulties with their schoolwork during the junior cycle and/or are perceived as being at risk of early school leaving (Smyth *et al.*, 2007). Previous research has identified significant gender and socio-economic disparities among those pursuing the LCA relative to other programmes at senior cycle (Smyth *et al.*, 2007; Byrne 2007; Byrne *et al.*, 2009). A key issue is selection into the LCA. While analyses of Irish School Leavers' Survey data suggests that LCA students are more likely to exercise some element of 'choice' in deciding on their track than LCVP students (Byrne, 2007), research by Smyth *et al.*, (2007) concludes that patterns of LCA participation are likely to reflect the way in which key personnel at school encourage some students into the LCA track. Using a mixed methods approach, Chapters 3 and 4 of this report provide a greater understanding of the factors influencing provision of the programme in schools and student pathways into the LCA.

In its delivery, the pedagogical basis of the LCA places emphasis on active teaching and learning experiences and innovation in terms of the way students learn, in what they learn and in how their achievements are assessed. Student activities are practical and task based. According to Departmental guidelines on LCA, *...it is a person-centred course involving a cross-curricular approach rather than a subject-based structure... the programme is characterised by educational experiences of an active, practical and student-centred nature...* (DES/NCCA, 2000, p. 6). The Department of Education and Science view the advantage of the LCA in that *...it focuses on the talents of individual students and helps them to apply their learning to the reality of their lives ...*(DES/NCCA, 2004, p.6). In Chapters 5 and 6 of this report, we consider the perceptions of LCA participants of the learning experiences used in the programme, including the emphasis on work experience.

The nature of the LCA is of great interest, particularly when compared to similar programmes in other institutional contexts (Byrne, 2007). Some countries track students into differing ability tracks or schools as early as age 10 years (Austria, Germany and Hungary). By contrast, in other systems, including Canada, Japan, Norway, Sweden, England and the US, lower secondary education is comprehensive in nature and any tracking or curriculum differentiation does not generally occur until upper secondary education (Hanushek and Wossman, 2006). Systems also differ in whether different tracks are provided within the same school or institution (the integrated approach) or whether they take place in different institutions (the segregated approach) (Le Métais, 2002). Curriculum differentiation generally involves sorting young people into 'academic' and 'vocational' tracks. However, this distinction is far from unambiguous, because of the absence of any clear-cut definition of Initial Vocational Education and

Training (IVET) in many countries. Thus, some systems, such as Germany and the Netherlands, focus on the provision of occupationally specific skills within vocational tracks (Müller and Gangl, 2003). In contrast, other systems emphasise the development of generic work-related skills and so could be characterised as pre-vocational in nature. Thus, in the United States, the perspective has been one of a ‘new vocationalism’, with upper secondary level combining academic and pre-vocational education (Lewis and Cheng, 2006; Grubb *et al.*, 1996; Kantor and Tyack, 1982).

The consequences of tracking for young people’s later lives have been found to vary according to the strength of linkages between education and the labour market (Iannelli and Raffe 2007). On the one hand, systems underpinned by an ‘employment logic’ (such as Germany and the Netherlands) involve employers in shaping the nature and content of vocational courses and vocational qualifications have a strong market value. As a result, outcomes for academic and vocational graduates are ‘different but equal’. On the other hand, in systems characterised by ‘education logic’, the emphasis is not on the development of occupationally-specific skills and the relationship between vocational and secondary education is defined more by its lower social status than by a stronger orientation to employment (e.g. Scotland) (Iannelli and Raffe, 2007).

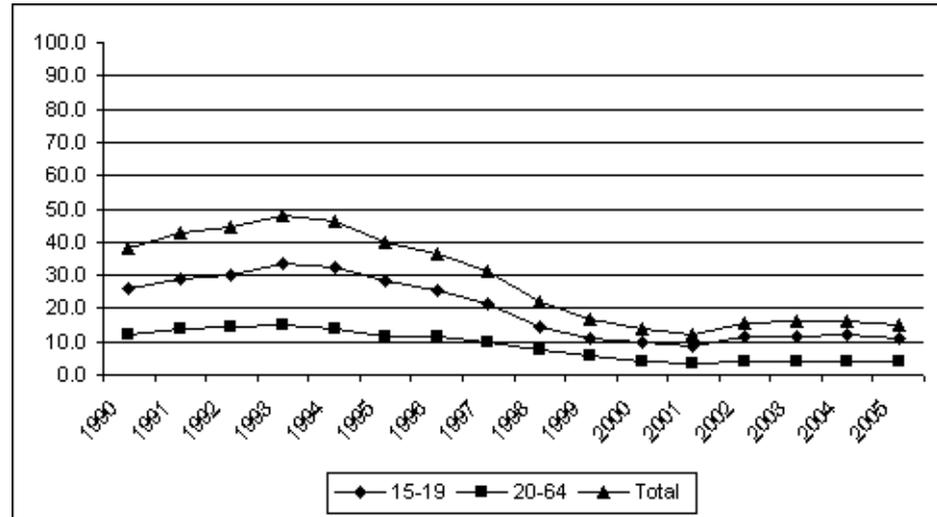
Ireland has followed a number of international and European policy trends that have been aimed towards providing flexibility and diversity in the options available to young people within second-level education (OECD, 2000; 2002). Ireland has been characterised as occupying an intermediate position in terms of having an ‘education’ or ‘employment’ logic (Iannelli and Raffe, 2007). Similar to the US programmes promoting the ‘new vocationalism’, the LCA places emphasis on the acquisition of generic skills (problem-solving, teamwork, communication skills) rather than specific skills, and on career pathways, with a substantial component of the programme structured around preparation for working life through vocational preparation and guidance. This brings us to one of the many debates around the structure and content of the LCA. While there is a vocational element underpinning the LCA, the effectiveness of the programme has been questioned because it deals more with the process element of work rather than developing specific skills (Tuohy, 2002). This raises the issue of whether the programme can provide viable pathways from school to work or further education for LCA students. This issue forms an important part of our research. The pathways of LCA school leavers are compared with those of other school leavers in Chapters 7 and 8.

To date, commentaries on the LCA in the early days of its introduction exist rather than any systematic research studies (for example, see Tuohy and Doyle, 1994; Gleeson and Granville, 1995). Concerns about the ‘ring-fenced’ nature of the programme have been expressed (Gleeson and Granville, 1995) both in terms of curricular content but also assessment practices. Tuohy and Doyle (1994) acknowledge that the programme shows “an admirable concern to cater for all students” but also express concern that the programme could further rather than reduce inequality. This report aims to consider these issues using a mixed methods approach.

1.3 A Brief History of the Irish Second-level Educational System

Earlier in this chapter we noted that the mix of academic and vocational curriculum provided by the LCA and its pathways to both labour market entry and further education represents a departure from what has traditionally been offered in the Irish context. This section provides an overview of the curricular content of senior cycle education. Traditionally and comparatively, the Irish second-level education system has been characterised as a general education system, which deals more with academic learning than ‘vocational type’ learning. Despite the current provision of a differentiated curriculum at senior cycle providing different tracks, it is often overlooked that Ireland once had a bipartite system of vocational and academic education in secondary schools. Until the establishment of vocational schools, the second-level curriculum tended to be academic in focus. The end of the bipartite system came in the 1960s with a spate of educational reforms, spurred on by the *Investment in Education* report. These included free second-level education and free school transport; Group, Intermediate and Leaving Certificate curricula were integrated and non-denominational comprehensive schools were introduced. Comprehensive schools were to become co-educational schools, open to all classes, genders and levels of ability, offering a wide curriculum to attempt to reduce the gap between academic secondary and vocational sectors. Importantly, it was at this time, that all three sectors – secondary, vocational and community/comprehensive schools – became integrated in a common curriculum and examination framework.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that little attention has been paid to the fact that educational policy in the Republic of Ireland is in continual change, particularly in relation to school-based ‘vocational-type’ education (Byrne, 2007). While the LCA was introduced into schools in 1995, it effectively shared a similar position in the second-level education structure as a spate of educational interventions in the 1970s, particularly the pre-employment and Vocational Preparation and Training (VPT) programmes. These programmes were devised at a time of high youth unemployment, and according to Williams and O’Shea (1981), the provision of this type of curriculum in schools was the first sign of the school being used to reduce the youth unemployment pool by providing students with work experience and career foundation. Research undertaken regarding these programmes indicates that they were highly structured by school type from the onset. Pre-employment courses were offered only in vocational and community/comprehensive schools but not in second-level schools (Williams and O’Shea, 1981). While VPT programmes were permitted in secondary schools, the vast majority (80 per cent) of VPT provision was provided in vocational and community schools (Department of Enterprise and Employment, 1994). Furthermore, these programmes have generally been associated with the most disadvantaged of young people (see Williams and O’Shea, 1981). From Figure 1.1 we see that the more recent intervention of the LCA with its mix of academic and vocational curriculum was introduced at a time of declining youth unemployment, with an aim of offering pathways directly into the labour market but also into further education.

Figure 1.1: Rates of Youth Unemployment 1990-2005

Source: Smyth (2007).

1.4 International Empirical and Theoretical Research on Curriculum Differentiation

The previous section has indicated that the practice of differentiating the curriculum has been apparent in the Irish context for quite some time. In addition, it has also outlined that the practice of differentiating the curriculum at senior cycle has been motivated by labour market conditions, particularly in response to large-scale youth unemployment in the 1960s and 1970s. Most of the literature on curriculum differentiation derives from the United States, and within this literature, the practice of placing students according to ability or differentiating the curriculum for different groups of students is commonly referred to as ‘tracking’. Practices of ‘tracking’ and ‘streaming’ are at the heart of theoretical debates regarding education and inequality in the sociology of education. Much of the research on tracking has focused on how tracks operate and how this affects students and rests on two competing theories: that of human capital theory, and theories of social reproduction. Human capital theory views educational attainment, both academic and vocational, as an investment (Becker, 1975). It also views the provision of vocationally related education within second-level education as a *safety-net* which retains less academic young people within the educational system and enhances their chances of finding employment as skilled workers. According to this view, vocational education equips students with skills that can enhance their productivity on the job. Therefore, vocationally educated workers are in demand and their chances of gaining employment and decent wages are enhanced compared to those with lower levels of educational qualifications (see Blossfeld 1992 and an extension of this argument in Shavit and Muller 2000). Alternatively, other commentators draw on theories of class reproduction to argue that providing a differentiated curriculum is a mechanism for the *reproduction of social inequality* across generations. This view suggests that this system ‘sorts’ working class people and socialises them into subordinate roles. While this may help people out of unemployment, the effects on other labour market outcomes (such as job security and status) may be less favourable (Iannelli and Raffe, 2007, p. 49). Furthermore, this view holds that working-class students are typically placed in lower tracks which, in turn, reduce their chances of attending university, and of subsequently entering the professions and other high prestige occupations (Gamoran and Mare, 1989; Iannelli, 1997; Shavit, 1990).

From the school perspective, tracking is seen as a way to match teaching and learning to the abilities and orientations of different groups of students in order to foster educational development for all (Oakes, 2000, p. 2). However, it has been argued that the practice of tracking has not, in fact, resulted in parity of esteem across different groups (Oakes, 2000, p.2). While the previous section has shown that since the 1960s, Irish youths have been channelled towards different types of programmes at senior cycle, debates about *how* students are channelled towards these different trajectories have largely been absent from Irish studies, with a focus instead on the outcomes of programme participation.

The international research suggests that students from different socio-economic (class and income) backgrounds, ethnic backgrounds and students with different academic abilities enrol in different types of programmes at upper secondary level. That is, working-class students are typically placed in lower tracks, a process which reduces their chances of attending third-level education or entering professions and other high prestige occupations (Gamoran and Mare, 1989; Shavit, 1990; Iannelli, 2000; Arum and Shavit, 1995). A number of international studies have considered how students are assigned to tracks (see for example Oakes and Guiton, 1995; Lucas 1999; Ainsworth and Roscigno, 2005). These studies suggest that, in practice, the assignment of students into tracks is not only based on academic considerations, such as grades, scores on standardised tests, teacher and other school staff recommendations, prior track placement and course prerequisites. Non-academic considerations in this body of research have included course conflict (timetabling), co-curricular and extracurricular schedules, work demands, teacher and curricular resources and the transfer of social, economic and political resources. Furthermore, track assignment is dependent on the schools that students attend because schools vary in the range of factors on which they rely to assign students to tracks, and the weight that they attach to each factor.

Sociologists differ in terms of how they see processes of curriculum differentiation in the context of the overall educational system. While some prefer to focus on the 'unintended consequences' of curriculum differentiation (see for example, Shavit, 1990, Hallinan, 2007; Shavit and Muller, 2000), others see curriculum differentiation as an intended method of reproducing social inequality (see for example Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). The former social stratification theorists offer explanations as to why different groups of people pursue different types of programmes. First, attending a class alongside highly motivated and academically successful students enhances one's own chances of success (Coleman *et al.*, 1966; Hallinan and Williams, 1990). Since 'lower' tracks are usually attended by academically weaker students, they are deprived of the beneficial effect of a more favourable milieu. Second, less academic tracks such as the LCA offer a more restricted curriculum and their students are less likely to take advanced courses (Gamoran, 1987; Oakes, 1985). Third, in such tracks, less time may be devoted to actual instruction, and instruction is conducted at a lower level of intellectual complexity (Oakes, 1985). Consequently, students in the lower tracks learn less than those in the upper tracks and are less likely to succeed in college admission tests. Fourth, being placed in a lower track or ability group signals to students that they are less worthy, which in turn dampens both their expectations of what they can achieve and their aspirations for the future (Vanfossen *et al.*, 1987). Thus, placement in such a track at the

secondary level in itself reduces students' chances of going on to college. This viewpoint taps into the debate that relates to whether ...*tracks shape students* or *students self-select into tracks*... (Shavit and Muller, 2000). Those who argue that tracks shape students posit that tracking is responsible for the differences in outcomes between academic-track and vocational-track students. Others argue that the gap in outcomes is the inevitable result of student self-selection into programmes. This view holds that students who select into programmes such as the LCA differ so much in aspirations and aptitude to begin with at the start of second-level education that differences in outcomes would hold irrespective of their experiences at school. A possible limitation of the latter view is that it ignores possible variation in the degree of choice allowed to students in track entry. Each of these explanations will be considered in relation to their validity regarding the LCA, and can be considered in relation to the following research questions.

1.5 Research Questions

Using a mixed methods framework and combining a number of quantitative data sources and qualitative interviews with LCA school leavers, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What proportion of second-level schools provide the LCA programme? What kinds of schools provide LCA? How does take-up of the programme vary across schools?
2. What is the social profile of LCA participants? What 'types' of student enter LCA based on their previous experiences in junior cycle? What kinds of students take LCA, in terms of their gender, social background, and prior academic ability/performance? What are their reasons for pursuing LCA?
3. How many students drop out of LCA before completion and what are their characteristics? What are their main reasons for dropping out?
4. How do LCA students view their school experiences and learning experiences in LCA? What are their perceptions of the teaching methods and learning approaches used? How are their social relations within the school influenced by LCA participation?
5. How do LCA students perceive the work experience component of the curriculum? How does work experience and career guidance influence career decision making and occupational aspirations?
6. Are there viable pathways for LCA students after leaving school? Do young people who have taken LCA make a smooth transition into paid employment compared with other school leavers? What kinds of employment in terms of skill level and pay do LCA leavers enter?
7. To what extent do LCA leavers avail of post-school education and training opportunities? What factors facilitate and/or constrain their take-up of such opportunities?

1.6 Chapter Outline

The remainder of the report is outlined as follows. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the data and methods used in the study. In doing so, it discusses the merits of adopting a mixed methods approach and the suitability of utilising this approach for this research study. Chapter 3 considers the provision and take-up of the LCA in schools as well as issues relating to early school leaving. Chapter 4 considers pathways into the LCA, outlining the social profile and characteristics of participants and previous experiences in junior cycle relative to the other senior cycle groups (LCE, LCVP). Chapter 5 then explores the type of learning experienced by LCA students, and the extent to which it differs from learning processes among other Leaving Certificate students. In doing so, it considers LCA students' perceptions of the content of the programme, the perceived standards of schoolwork, teaching methods and social relations with peers and teachers. Chapter 6 focuses on the work experience component of the LCA, given that work experience represents a substantial component of the programme. In doing so, it considers the nature and perceptions of the work experience as well as the role of work experience in career decision-making and providing contact with employers. Chapters 7 and 8 then consider whether the LCA provides viable post-school pathways for LCA students. In doing so, the relative position of LCA students is considered compared to all other school leavers – that is, those who leave school before or upon completion of senior cycle. Specifically, Chapter 7 considers the economic status of school leavers one year after leaving school, the relative chances of being unemployed or inactive since leaving school and the occupational and industrial sectors that they enter into. Chapter 8 considers progression into further education and training. Finally, Chapter 9 provides an overview of the findings and discusses policy implications.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Mixed Methods Research

This study adopted a mixed methods approach using a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques, methods and concepts. The basic assumption of this methodological approach is that the use of both methods provides a better understanding of the research problem and questions than either method by itself (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). The use of mixed methods in educational research has been well established internationally (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2007; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; 2003; Cresswell, 2003; Greene and Caracelli, 1997). One of the main benefits of using a mixed methods approach is that it provides the opportunity to present more divergent and diverse viewpoints. Using quantitative and qualitative data sources means that findings can be verified and strengthened. In addition, however, new ideas may emerge from one or other method producing new theories or results (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). This study adopted an ‘explanatory mixed methods design’ which means that the quantitative data was collected in distinct phases followed by qualitative interviews. This allowed for greater insight into students experiences which often helped to explain in more detail the initial quantitative research results. Divergent findings between the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research often allowed for a valuable re-examination of assumptions (Erzberger and Prein, 1997). In some ways, this process of validation and contradiction between data sources provided more convincing and robust explanations of results.

This study draws on the strengths and minimises the weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative research strategies to provide greater insight into the views of LCA students. National level data was used to document experiences of students before they entered LCA, their learning experiences during the programme and their educational, occupational and personal outcomes when they left. To gain a detailed understanding of LCA students, it was also necessary to document individual experiences, opinions and reflections of LCA school leavers and gain an understanding of how the programme has impacted on students’ lives subsequently.

Three main data sources were used in the study:

- School Leavers’ Survey, 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2007 for national data on the post-school outcomes of all school leavers;
- Post-Primary Longitudinal Study data based on 12 case study schools and 900 students to examine characteristics of LCA students and their learning experiences in LCA;

- 29 in-depth interviews with LCA school leavers to provide a detailed understanding of student experiences prior to, during and after they leave LCA.

2.2 School Leavers' Surveys

The School Leavers' Surveys have been undertaken at the ESRI since 1980. They form a valuable data source on the experiences of young people both in school and in their initial post-school pathways. Each survey is based on a nationally representative sample of all young people who have left the official second-level education system during the course of an academic year. In so doing the surveys include both those who have completed their second-level education and those who left school early. The surveys capture school leavers 18 months to 2 years after their departure from school and ask a diverse range of questions on their school experiences, subjects and programmes taken, their social background characteristics and their post-school labour market and educational experiences. This report includes analysis of the four most recent surveys of 2000/01, 2002/03, 2003/04 and 2004/05 school leavers, giving a total sample size of 9,700 school leavers, 417 of whom left having completed the LCA programme. The analysis is particularly focused on the reasons for the enrolment of young people on the LCA programme; the views of different school leaver groups on their schooling and their teachers and their engagement in truancy; the extent to which LCA and other leaver groups progress to post-school education and training (such as PLC courses and state sponsored training programmes); and the smoothness of their labour market integration and the nature and quality of employment secured. Much of the analysis compares the experiences of young people who completed the LCA programme with those who left prior to completion of senior cycle and young people who performed at various levels in the LCE and LCVP programmes.

2.3 Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS)

The PPLS draws on data gathered from a theoretical sample of twelve case-study schools, identified on the basis of a postal survey of all second-level principals conducted at the beginning of the study. These schools were selected to capture varying approaches to ability grouping, subject choice and student integration, and encompass a range of sectors, sizes, locations and student characteristics. The study has followed a cohort of approximately 900 students from their entry to first year to their completion of second-level education (see Byrne and Smyth forthcoming, Smyth *et al.*, 2007, Smyth *et al.*, 2006 and Smyth *et al.*, 2004). Students completed a written questionnaire each year (twice in first year) covering their attitudes to school, their choice of programmes and subjects, and their aspirations for the future. In addition, in-depth interviews were carried out with groups of the students, and with key personnel in the school, including principals and guidance counsellors. This is the first such longitudinal study in the Irish context and it allows us to identify the characteristics of young people who go on to take the different Leaving Certificate programmes. Analyses presented in this study relate to the questionnaires completed by fifth and sixth year students in the case-study schools. The number of the cohort taking LCA is relatively small (information was available on 51 junior cycle students who entered LCA but data on school experiences within LCA relate to 38 individuals) so the results should be interpreted with some caution. However, these are the only available data on young people's experiences of the different Leaving

Certificate programmes as they move through senior cycle and can usefully supplement the information obtained from other sources.

2.4 Moving Up Survey of Second-level Principals

The Moving Up Survey was conducted in order to provide context for the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (see below). It involved a postal survey of all second-level school principals which was carried out in early 2002. The questionnaire to principals focused on issues relating to the transition from primary to second-level schooling. However, it also collected considerable detail on subject and programme provision, ability grouping and the nature of student intake to each school. There was a high response rate (78 per cent) to the survey, with a total number of 567 principals participating in the survey. These survey data allow us to relate whether a school provides the LCA programme or not to a range of school characteristics, including the prevalence of literacy and numeracy difficulties among its student intake.

2.5 Life History Interviews

As this part of the study seeks to elicit opinions and feelings about young peoples' experiences in LCA and their post-school pathways, in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted. The interview strategy used is what Patton (1990) describes as the "interview guide approach" which means each interviewee was asked the same basic questions with variations in the wording and the sequence in which the questions were tackled. It was felt that semi-structured face-to-face interviews would *...allow for a more thorough examination of experiences, feelings and opinions that closed questions could never hope to capture...* (Kitchen and Tate, 1999, p. 213). They also allowed the possibility of modifying the line of enquiry, to follow up on interesting responses and investigate underlying motives (Robson, 1993, p. 229). By examining educational issues through individual lenses, these interviews offer diverse perspectives on students' school experiences and provide a holistic understanding of the interviewee's point of view.

The framework of the interview schedule was within the life/oral history context. Instead of addressing respondents' opinion in present tense, the interviews sought reflection and to some extent analysis by the respondent about past events. As Thompson (1998) highlights, using a life/oral history framework covers the underpinnings of the 'decisions which individuals make' (Thompson, 1998, p. 298). Using this framework enabled this study to investigate the reflections and opinions of young people about their experiences prior to LCA, during LCA and their post-school outcomes since they left the programme.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, with a list of themes and key questions serving to guide the interviews. However, given the wide range of factors and processes influencing young peoples' experience of LCA, the interviews were sufficiently fluid to allow for a full exploration of the experiences of individual participants. Topics discussed included experiences of school at junior cycle, the pathways and choice process into LCA, learning experiences in LCA in addition to respondents' occupational or educational outcomes when they left school. The interview questions began with areas which it was felt participants would be familiar and comfortable to talk about. These 'warm up' questions were designed to elicit information of a factual and descriptive nature concerning their own biographies. Following this introduction, the interviews focused on:

- Respondent school experiences prior to entering LCA and key influences on their decision making process;
- Learning experiences during LCA focusing on LCA curriculum, assessment, teaching methods, teacher-student relations (including guidance counselling) and work experience;
- Post-school pathways into the labour market, further studies, apprenticeship or unemployment;
- Opinion of LCA, perceived benefits of the programme and its usefulness since leaving school.

Data from the 2006 School Leavers' Survey was used to identify interviewees who had completed or dropped out of LCA during the 2003/04 academic year. We identified 150 LCA students in the survey, 120 of those were young people who had completed the programme and 30 who had dropped out. Letters of request were sent to their addresses and despite a financial incentive of €50, just 29 young people responded and agreed to be interviewed, 24 who had graduated from LCA and 5 who had dropped out in fifth year. It is important to note, however, the selection issues involved in this type of qualitative research. The low level of response may have been due to the fact that some young people did not wish to talk about their school experiences or lives subsequently. Therefore, it must be borne in mind that those who did respond were comfortable to have these conversations and may represent more positive experiences in LCA.

Analysis of the sample of LCA completers interviewed as part of the qualitative research shows them to be largely representative of the national population of LCA school leavers. With the exception of a higher proportion of females in our LCA sample and a slightly higher proportion of young people from professional backgrounds as compared to the national population, we are confident that our sample of young people captures the broader population of LCA participants. On a range of key educational attitudes (such as views on whether they thought school work was worth doing, their friends took school seriously and teachers listened to their views), our qualitative sample virtually mirrors the views of the larger LCA school leaving population.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data was later analysed using the QSR NVivo 8 software to identify emerging themes. Table 2.1 indicates the characteristics of participants. Out of the sample of 16 females and 13 males, 5 interviewees had dropped out of LCA in fifth year and the remainder had completed the programme. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the report for all those interviewed. Aged between 21 and 25 years, the respondents were distributed throughout the country in 17 different counties. They attended a variety of school types which included 12 secondary, 6 vocational, 10 community/comprehensive and one special school. 11 out of the 28 schools were designated DEIS schools. Respondents had entered a wide range of pathways since they left school and at the time of interview 10 were in employment, 8 in further education and training, 6 unemployed and 5 engaged in home duties.¹

¹ 'Home duties' refers to those not in the labour market because of childcare and/or household responsibilities.

2.6 Limitations of the Study

This report presents the first systematic study of student experiences of LCA, exploring their entry into the programme, their experiences of the programme, and the outcomes for LCA graduates. The authors acknowledge that this study does not attempt to represent the perspectives of school principals, teachers, guidance counsellors, parents or employers. Further research examining teacher views of the programme and its recognition by the broader society (especially employers and parents) would yield additional insights for policy development (see Chapter 9).

Table 2.1: Summary of Interviewee Characteristics

| Name | Completed LCA | School Sector | Location | Status at the Time of Interview, 2008 |
|---------|---------------|-----------------------|-----------|---------------------------------------|
| Alice | Yes | Girls Secondary | Midlands | Home Duties |
| Andrew | Yes | Coed Comm/Comp DEIS | Dublin | Apprenticeship |
| Anne | Yes | Coed Secondary | West | Employed |
| Aoibhin | Yes | Girls' Secondary | North | Unemployed |
| Barbara | Yes | Coed Comm/Comp DEIS | Mideast | Employed |
| David | Yes | Coed Vocational DEIS | West | Employed |
| Deirdre | Yes | Coed Vocational | Mideast | Unemployed |
| Derek | Yes | Boys' Vocational DEIS | West | Employed |
| Donal | No | Coed Comm/Comp | West | Apprenticeship |
| Garry | No | Coed Comm/Comp | Southwest | Employed |
| Graham | Yes | Coed Comm/Comp | Southwest | Apprenticeship |
| Jack | No | Boys' Secondary | Southeast | Apprenticeship |
| Jackie | Yes | Coed Vocational DEIS | North | Home Duties |
| Johnny | Yes | Coed Vocational | Midlands | Employed |
| Justin | Yes | Coed Secondary DEIS | West | Employed |
| Linda | Yes | Coed Secondary | Midlands | Student |
| Fiona | Yes | Girls' Secondary | West | Employed |
| Mary | Yes | Girls' Secondary | Southwest | Home Duties |
| Maura | Yes | Coed Special School | Southwest | Employed |
| Maurice | Yes | Coed Comm/Comp DEIS | Dublin | Student |
| Niamh | Yes | Girls' Secondary | Dublin | Employed |
| Rebecca | No | Coed Comm/Comp DEIS | Dublin | Home Duties |
| Ronan | Yes | Coed Secondary | Mideast | Apprenticeship |
| Roy | No | Coed Comm/Comp DEIS | Mideast | Unemployed |
| Sandra | Yes | Coed Vocational | Midlands | Home Duties |
| Sarah | Yes | Girls' Secondary | Southwest | Employed |
| Siobhan | Yes | Coed Secondary | West | Employed |
| Tim | Yes | Coed Comm/Comp | Midlands | Unemployed |
| Zoe | No | Coed Comm/Comp DEIS | Dublin | Unemployed |

Data for this study was largely collected during a period of economic boom in the Irish economy. We acknowledge these conditions impacted on LCA participation, work experience, access to post-school education (such as apprenticeships), and employer engagement with the programme. The possible implications of changing economic conditions for the programme are discussed further in Chapter 9.

3. THE PROVISION AND TAKE-UP OF THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED PROGRAMME

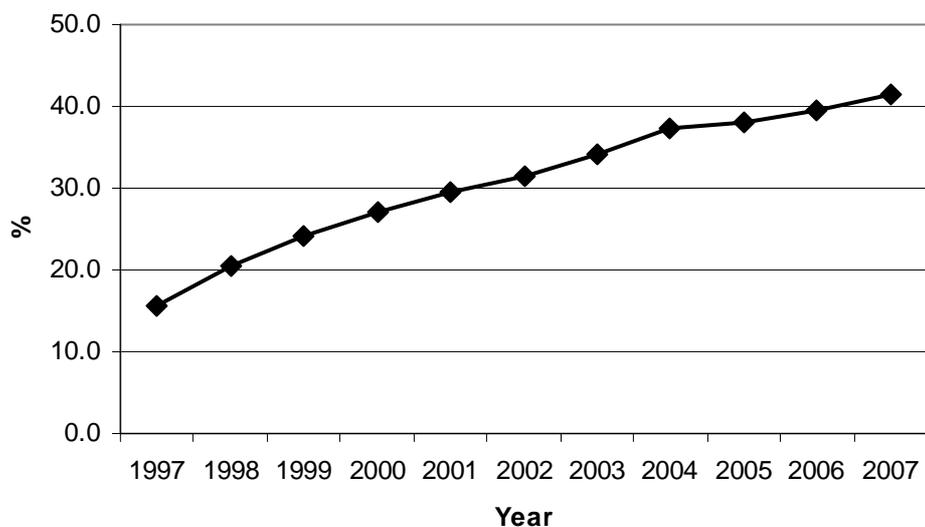
3.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 described the rationale for the introduction of the LCA programme and the increased differentiation now evident within the senior cycle. This chapter examines the extent to which access to the programme varies across different kinds of schools and looks at the proportion of the student cohort that takes part in LCA. The final section of the chapter addresses the issue of drop-out from the LCA programme.

3.2 Overall Trends in Provision and Take-up

This section examines the proportion and characteristics of schools which provide the LCA programme as well as trends over time in the numbers of young people taking part in LCA. Figure 3.1 shows the proportion of second-level schools which provide the LCA programme. Provision levels have grown significantly over recent years, from 15 per cent of schools in 1997 to 42 per cent in 2007.

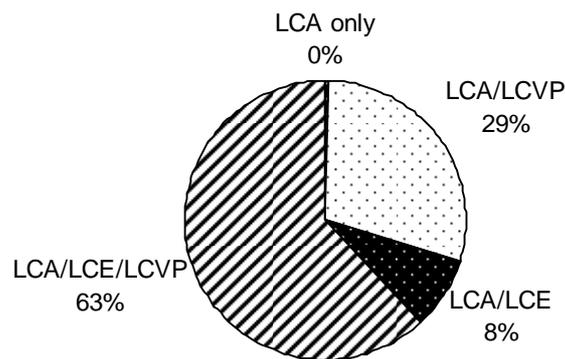
Figure 3.1: Proportion of Second-level Schools Providing LCA, 1997-2007



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

There is no ‘trade-off’ between a school’s providing LCA and it providing the other Leaving Certificate programmes. LCA is most commonly available in schools which provide all three programmes, with almost two-thirds of schools which provide LCA also offering Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) (Figure 3.2). Few schools provide the LCA only, with the exception of some Special Schools which provide it for students wishing to take a state examination.

Figure 3.2: Patterns of Programme Provision Across Second-level Schools Where LCA is Offered (2006)

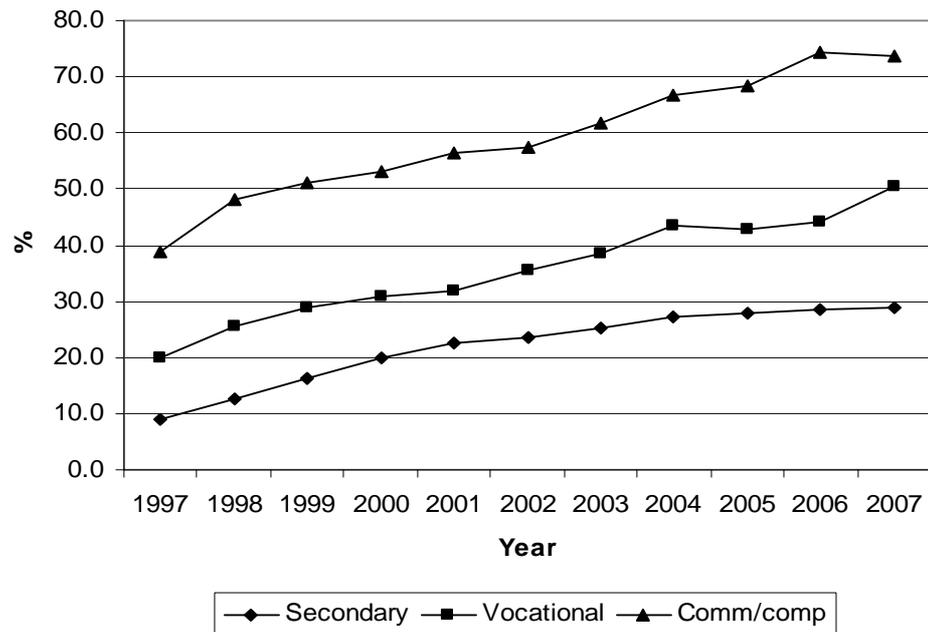


Source: DES student database, 2006.

Schools can apply or ‘seek approval’ from the Department of Education and Science (DES) to offer the LCA and this decision is made at school level. Schools designated as serving disadvantaged communities under the DEIS Action Plan for Social Inclusion are particularly encouraged to apply for LCA by the DES (DES, 2009).

Whether a school provides LCA varies by school sector. Levels of provision are highest in the community/comprehensive sector, where the majority (almost three-quarters) of schools provide the programme. In contrast, LCA is provided by under a third of voluntary secondary schools. The proportion of schools providing the programme has increased over time in all school sectors (Figure 3.3).

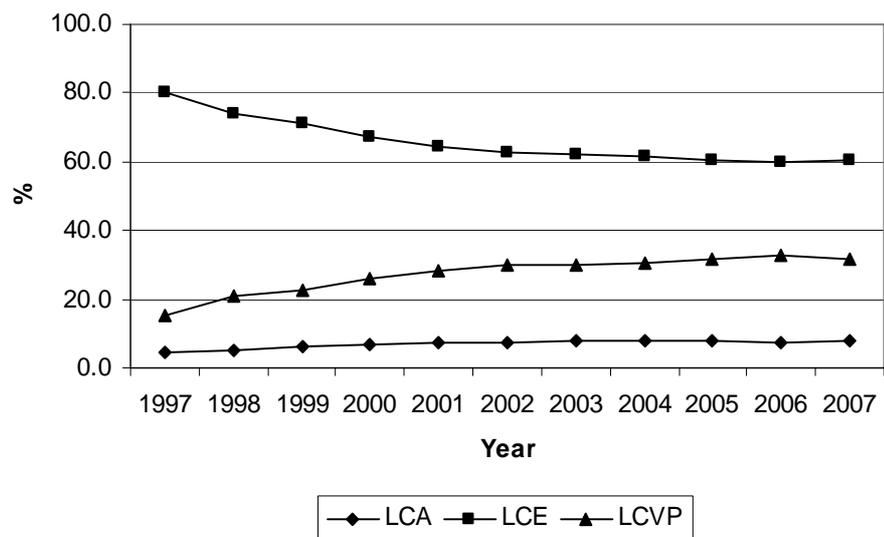
Figure 3.3: LCA Provision by School Sector, 1997-2007



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

It is also useful to look at the proportion of students who take LCA. This can be assessed by looking at the numbers taking the first year of the LCA programme, the numbers taking the second year of the programme or the number of examination candidates. Figure 3.4 shows the proportion of students in the first year of the senior cycle taking different Leaving Certificate programmes. While the majority (six in ten) of students continue to take the established Leaving Certificate programme, participation in the LCA programme has increased from 4 per cent to 8 per cent over time.

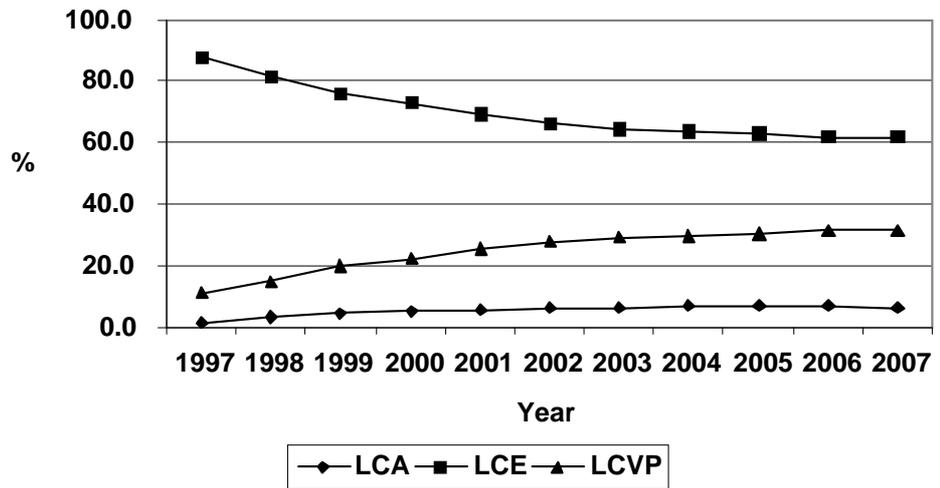
Figure 3.4: Participation in Year One of the Leaving Certificate, 1997-2007



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

Trends in participation in the second year of senior cycle are similar (Figure 3.5), although LCA participants make up a smaller proportion of second year than first year students (6.3 per cent compared with 7.8 per cent in 2007). The reason for the discrepancy between the two sets of data relates to differential attrition from the three Leaving Certificate programmes; this issue is discussed further in Section 3.4 below.

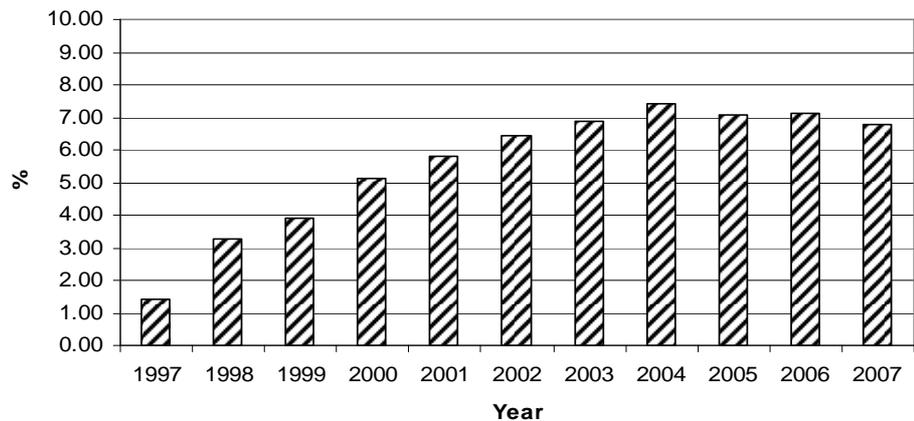
Figure 3.5: Participation in Year Two of the Leaving Certificate, 1997-2007



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

Among those who sat any form of Leaving Certificate exam, LCA candidates make up around 7 per cent of the cohort (Figure 3.6).² Although there has been an increase in this proportion over time, the figure has remained relatively stable over the period since 2003.

Figure 3.6: Proportion Taking LCA Among LC Examination Candidates, 1997-2007

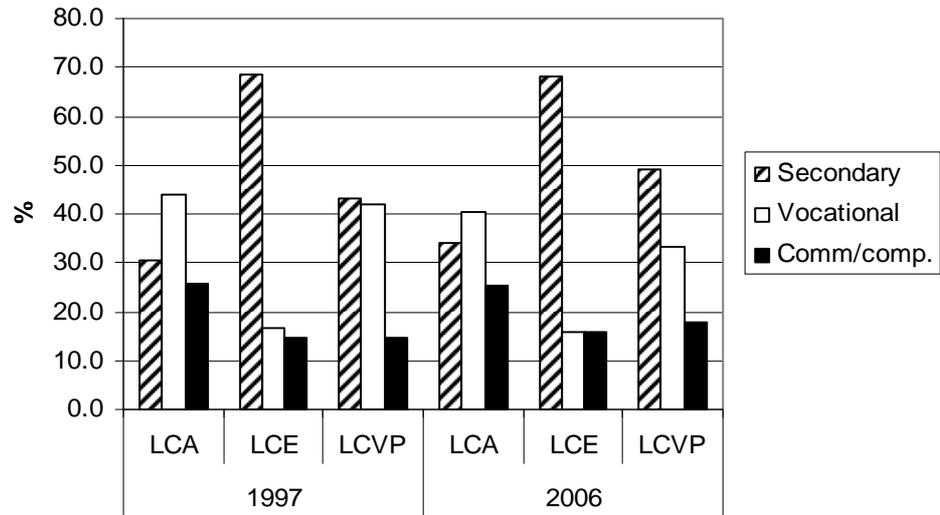


Source: DES Statistical Reports, various years; SEC Annual Reports, various years.

² In June 2008, 3,445 candidates completed the final LCA examinations.

Figure 3.7 shows that LCA students are distributed differently across school sectors than those taking other Leaving Certificate programmes. The largest single group (four in ten) of those taking LCA attend vocational schools. A third of LCA students attend secondary schools while a quarter attend community/comprehensive schools. In contrast, students taking LCE are disproportionately concentrated in the secondary sector, with over two-thirds of LCE students attending voluntary secondary schools.

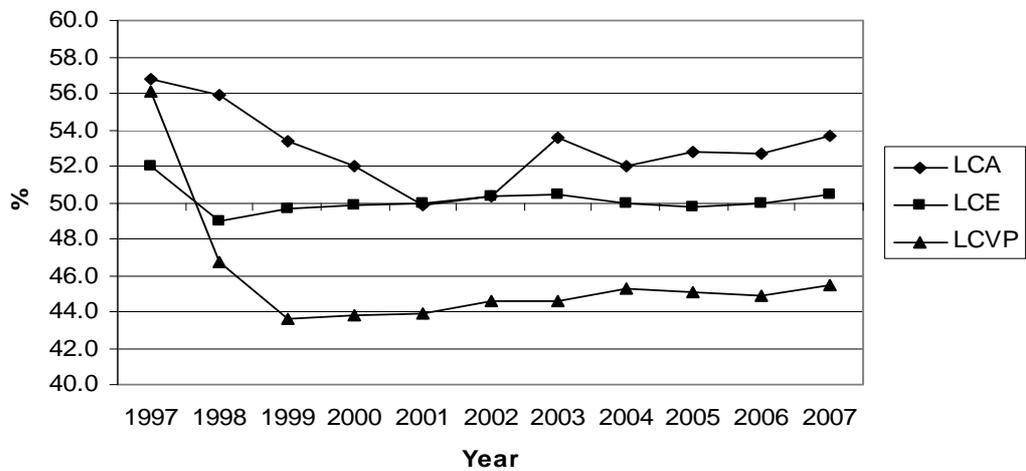
Figure 3.7: Distribution of Students by Programme and School Sector, 1997 and 2006



Source: DES Statistical Reports, various years.

Figure 3.8 shows the gender composition of those taking the different Leaving Certificate programmes. Males make up more than half of LCA participants, except for a brief spell in 2001-2. Males make up around half of those taking LCE and under half of those taking LCVP. More detailed information on the background characteristics of LCA participants is provided in Chapter 4.

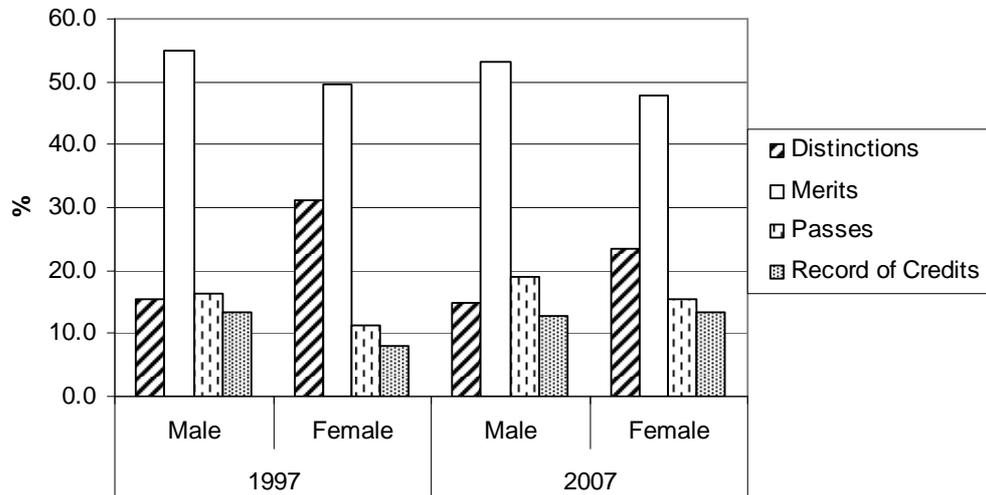
Figure 3.8: Male Representation Among Programme Participants, 1997-2007



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

The largest single group of those taking LCA receive a merit-level award, a pattern evident in both 1997 and 2007 (Figure 3.9). Female students are more likely to receive distinctions and less likely to receive passes than their male counterparts. Between 1997 and 2007, there has been a decline in the proportion of LCA candidates who receive distinctions.

Figure 3.9: LCA Awards, 1997 and 2007



* Pass 120-139 credits 60-69 per cent, Merit 140-169 credits 70-84 per cent, Distinction 170-200 credits 85-100 per cent

Source: DES Statistical Reports, various years; SEC Annual Reports, various years.

3.3 Which Schools Provide the LCA Programme?

The analysis shown above indicates variation in the provision of the LCA programme across school sectors. However, variation by sector may reflect differences in school size or composition so it is worth exploring whether other school characteristics influence provision. Two data sources can be used for this purpose: the *Moving Up* national survey of second-level principals from 2002, and the Department of Education and Science student database for 2006.

Table 3.1 shows the results of a set of logistic regression models of the factors predicting provision of the LCA programme in 2002 and 2006. Somewhat different variables are available in the two datasets but together they give us insights into the kinds of schools which offer the programme. Provision of LCA does not vary significantly by region so this factor is not included in the models shown. In both 2002 and 2006, larger schools were found to be more likely to provide the programme than smaller schools. This pattern reflects the constraints on smaller schools in allowing students to pursue diverse pathways at senior cycle. The variation by school sector indicated in Figure 3.3 above is not as pronounced when school size and disadvantaged status are taken into account. However, community/comprehensive schools are somewhat more likely than other school types to provide the programme, while boys' secondary schools are less likely to do so.

Table 3.1: School Factors Influencing LCA Provision, 2002 and 2006

| Factor | 2002 | | 2006 |
|--|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | |
| Constant | -2.114*** | -2.963*** | -2.476*** |
| School sector: | | | |
| Boys' Secondary | -0.531 | -0.791* | -0.551 [▲] |
| Coed Secondary | -0.513 | -0.713 | -0.155 |
| Vocational | 0.445 | -0.063 | 0.267 |
| Community/comprehensive (Base: Girls' Secondary) | 0.482 | 0.302 | 0.986** |
| School size: | | | |
| 200-399 | 0.520 | 0.541 | 1.340*** |
| 400-599 | 1.460** | 1.638** | 1.895*** |
| 600+ (Base: <200) | 1.720*** | 1.926*** | 2.082*** |
| Designated Disadvantaged Status | 1.214*** | 0.686* | 1.670*** |
| Gaelscoil | -1.324 [▲] | -1.434 [▲] | -0.890* |
| Fee-paying school | -2.473* | -2.119* | -20.161 |
| Perceived Literacy Problems Among Student intake: | | | |
| 6-15% | | 0.967* | - |
| 16-30% | | 1.418** | - |
| 31-45% | | 2.239*** | - |
| Over 45% (Base: <5%) | | 2.416*** | - |
| Nagelkerke R ² | 0.264 | 0.318 | 0.323 |

Note: From a logistic regression model, no region dummies included. *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; [▲] p<.10.

Source: Moving Up survey, 2002; DES student database, 2006.

Designated disadvantaged schools were 3.4 times more likely to provide LCA than non-disadvantaged schools in 2002; the differential was even more marked in 2006, with disadvantaged schools 5.3 times more likely to provide LCA than other schools. Fee-paying schools³ and gaelscoileanna were significantly less likely to provide the programme than non-fee-paying and English medium schools respectively. Additional information was available from the Moving Up survey on the profile of the student intake in terms of the perceived prevalence of literacy difficulties. Schools are clearly more likely to provide LCA the higher the proportion of students with literacy difficulties; schools where more than 45 per cent of the student intake have such difficulties are 11.2 times more likely to offer the programme than those where fewer than 5 per cent of students have literacy difficulties. The difference between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged schools is somewhat reduced when literacy difficulties are taken into account; in other words, designated disadvantaged schools are more likely to provide LCA at least in part because they have more students with literacy difficulties. However, even controlling for student intake, disadvantaged schools are twice as likely to provide LCA as non-disadvantaged schools.

In sum, school policy regarding whether to provide the LCA programme appears to reflect the perceived nature of the student intake, with higher provision levels in working-class schools and those serving

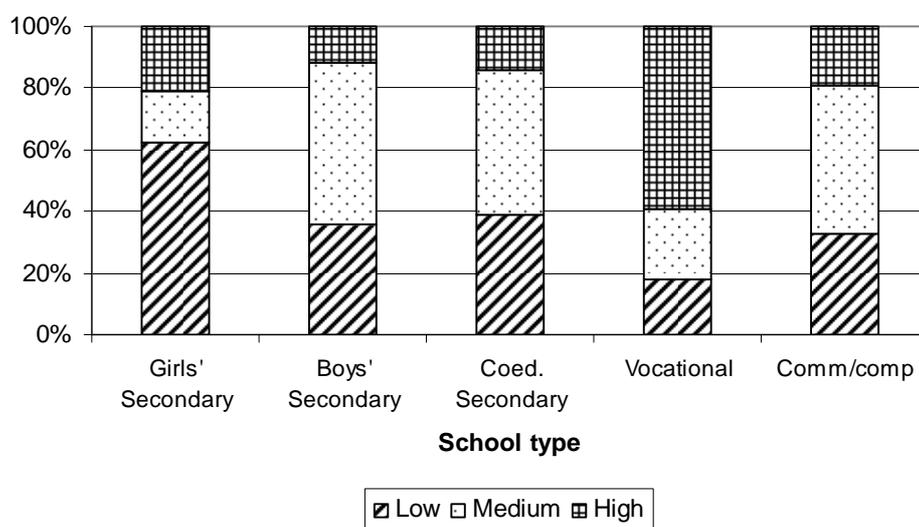
³ In 2006, none of the fee-paying schools provided LCA.

students with greater learning difficulties. It also appears to reflect logistical constraints with smaller schools much less likely to provide the programme.

3.4 Are There Differences Across Schools in the Take-up of LCA?

Among schools providing LCA, the proportion of students taking the programme varies significantly, with the average being 23 per cent of the senior cycle cohort.⁴ Schools were divided into 'low' (<13 per cent), 'medium' (13-26 per cent) and 'high' (>26 per cent) take-up categories. Take-up varied significantly by school sector: over half (59 per cent) of vocational schools which provide LCA are in the high take-up category compared with around a fifth of boys' secondary and coeducational secondary schools (Figure 3.10).

Figure 3.10: LCA Take-up by School-type

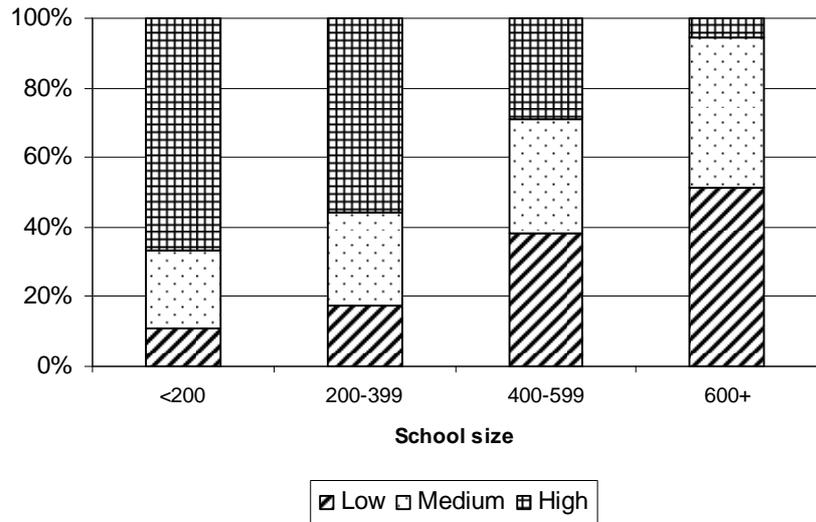


Source: DES student database, 2006.

Analyses above indicated that smaller schools are less likely to provide LCA. Where they do provide the programme, they tend to have higher take-up rates (Figure 3.11); two-thirds of schools with fewer than 200 students fall into this category compared with 6 per cent of large (>600) schools. This reflects the greater capacity of larger schools to provide programmes tailored to a small proportion of the cohort.

⁴ Take-up rates are based on the proportion of those who had taken the LCA programme as a proportion of all young people leaving a senior cycle programme in each school in 2006.

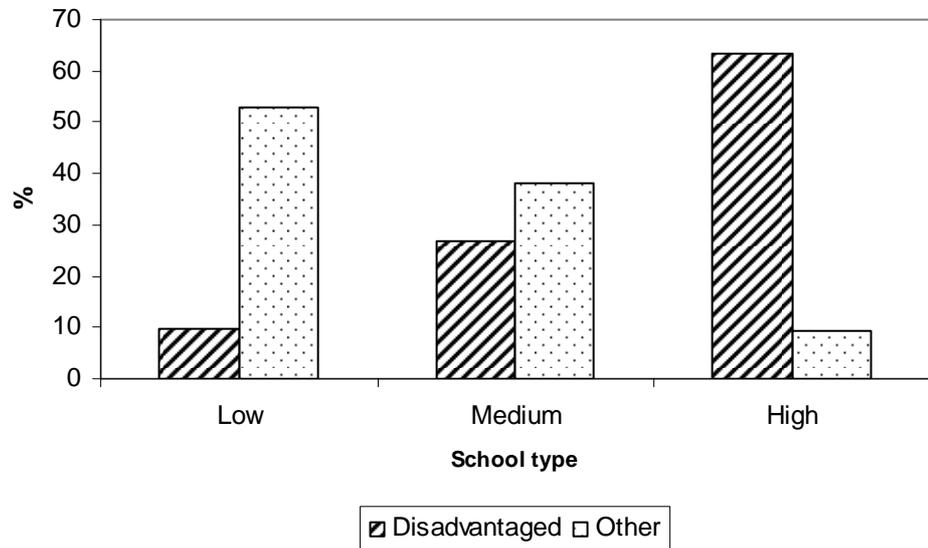
Figure 3.11: LCA Take-up by School Size



Source: DES student database, 2006.

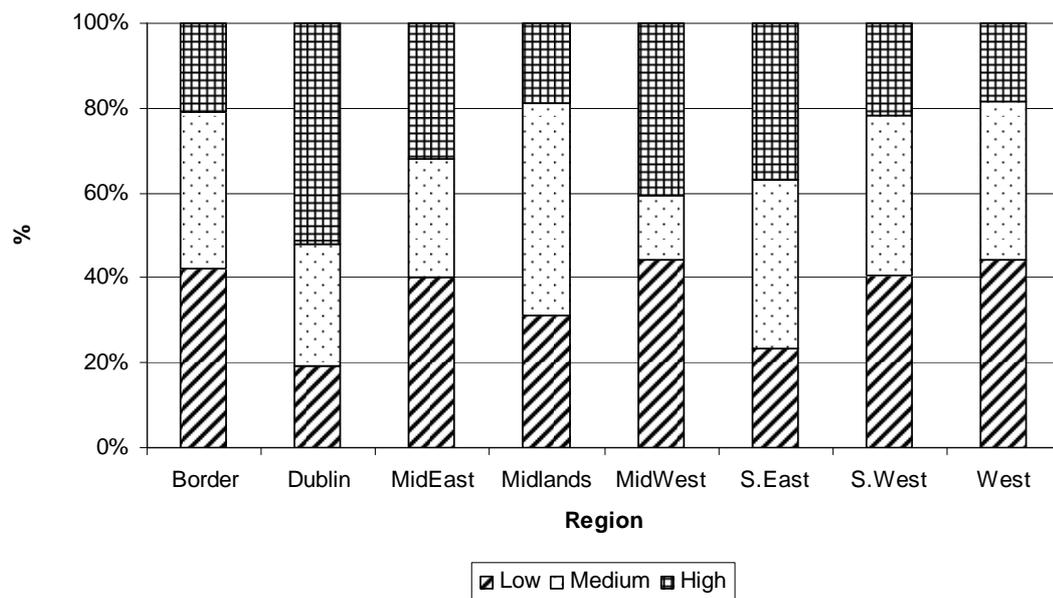
Disadvantaged schools are more likely to provide LCA and tend to have higher take-up rates when they do so (Figure 3.12). In contrast, non-disadvantaged schools providing LCA tend to fall into the low take-up group.

Figure 3.12: LCA Take-up by Disadvantaged Status



Source: DES student database, 2006.

Although the *provision* of LCA does not vary by region, *take-up rates* are found to differ, with the highest take-up in Dublin schools and the lowest take-up in the West and Midlands (Figure 3.13).

Figure 3.13: LCA Take-up by Region

Source: DES student database, 2006.

Table 3.2: School Factors Influencing High Take-up of LCA, 2006 (Schools Providing LCA Only)

| Factor | Coefficient |
|---|---------------------|
| Constant | -2.327* |
| School sector: | |
| Boys' Secondary | -1.901* |
| Coed Secondary | -0.445 |
| Vocational | 1.680** |
| Community/comprehensive (Base: Girls' Secondary) | -0.162 |
| School size: | |
| 200-399 | -0.349 |
| 400-599 | -1.119 [▲] |
| 600+ (Base: <200) | -3.085*** |
| Designated disadvantaged status | 2.117*** |
| Region: | |
| Border | -0.258 |
| Dublin | 1.777* |
| Mid-East | 0.910 |
| Midlands | -1.084 |
| Mid West | 1.434 |
| South East | 1.141 |
| South West (Base: West) | 0.353 |
| Nagelkerke R ² | 0.617 |

Note: From a logistic regression model, region dummies included. *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; [▲] p<.10.

Source: DES student database, 2006.

A logistic regression model was carried out in order to analyse the influence of different school characteristics on the likelihood of having high take-up of LCA among senior cycle students (see Table 3.2). Controlling for school size, disadvantaged status and location, vocational schools have the highest take-up while take-up is lowest in boys' secondary schools. The pattern for vocational schools may reflect the greater use of

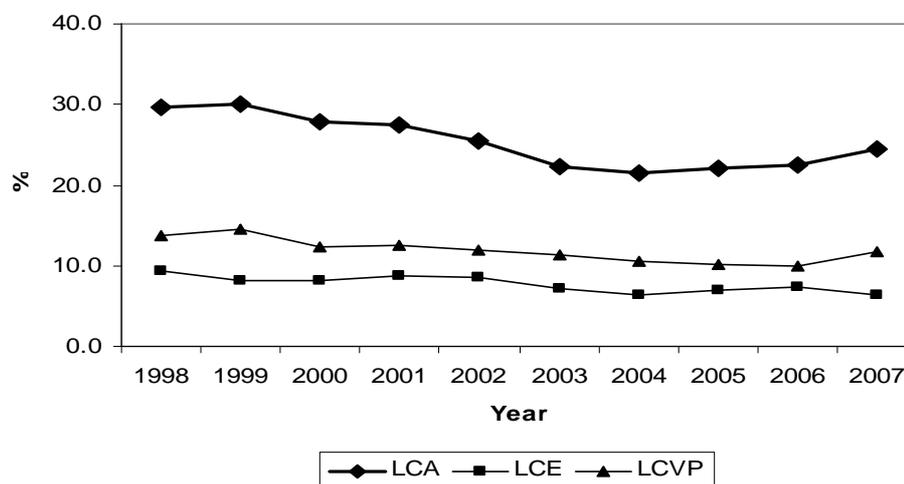
streaming at junior cycle in this sector (Smyth *et al.*, 2004); being in a lower stream class may then channel students into LCA, an issue which is discussed further in Chapter 4. Larger schools, that is, those with over 400 students, tend to have lower take-up rates than smaller schools due mainly to LCA students making up a smaller proportion in larger schools. Furthermore, disadvantaged schools are 8 times more likely to have high take-up than non-disadvantaged schools, all else being equal. The main regional effect evident is the sharp divide between Dublin and other regions; Dublin schools have significantly higher take-up of LCA than comparable schools in other regions.⁵

3.5 Drop-out From the LCA Programme

The introduction of the LCA programme was motivated by the desire to retain 'at risk' young people within the full-time educational system (see Chapter 1). This section explores the extent to which young people leave the LCA programme before completion. No published data are available on the extent of drop-out from the LCA (or any other LC) programme. However, the extent of early leaving can be inferred from other data sources.

First, an estimate of attrition within senior cycle can be derived by comparing the numbers of participants in year one of a programme with the number of participants in the programme in the following year. It is evident that attrition varies by programme type; in 2007, attrition rates were 25 per cent for LCA participants, 12 per cent for LCVP participants and 6 per cent for LCE participants (Figure 3.14). Furthermore, there has been a marked reduction in LCA attrition rates until 2004, since then, a slight increase has taken place.

Figure 3.14: Attrition Within Senior Cycle by Programme Type, 1998-2007



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

Other estimates can be derived by comparing the number of entrants to the first year of the LCA programme (based on DES Statistical Reports) and the number of LCA examination candidates two years later (based on

⁵ Explanations of regional disparities in the take-up of LCA, particularly the divide between take-up in Dublin and other regions is something that merits greater investigation in future research.

State Examinations Commission (SEC) data). This gives us non-completion rates of 37 per cent for LCA and 12 per cent for LCE/LCVP for those who entered senior cycle in 2005/6.

Table 3.3: Estimates of Non-completion by LC Programme

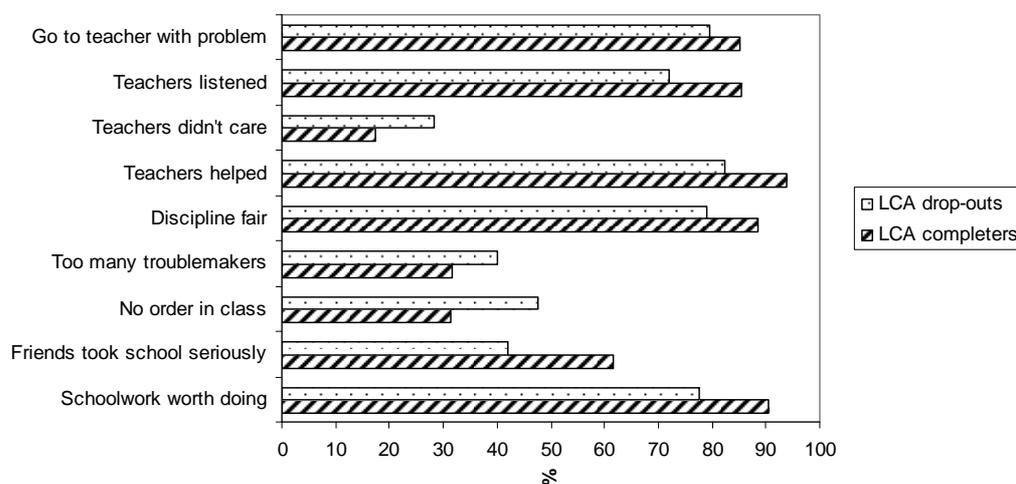
| Year 1 of LC Programme: | LCA | LCE/LCVP |
|-------------------------|------|----------|
| 2004/5 | 33.7 | 13.2 |
| 2005/6 | 37.1 | 11.7 |

Source: Department of Education and Science Statistical Report; State Examinations Commission examination data.

It should be noted that these patterns cannot be interpreted as saying that LCA contributes to early school leaving. In fact, the contrary may be the case. The factors which influence participation in LCA are likely to be the factors which also influence the likelihood of early school leaving. Thus, analyses in Chapter 4 indicate that LCA students are indeed disproportionately drawn from those groups of young people at risk of early leaving – having experienced more difficulty with schoolwork during junior cycle and holding more negative attitudes to school before entering LCA. The difficulty is in establishing whether students are less likely to drop out of school having taken part in the LCA programme since we cannot compare ‘like with like’ in comparing LCA and LCE outcomes. However, data from the School Leavers’ Survey yield some insight into the attitudes among early leavers and the reasons they give for leaving school at this stage.

Figure 3.15 compares attitudes to school among young people who completed LCA and those who left before completion. Early leavers had more negative attitudes to their teachers: they were more likely to report that their teachers did not care about them and less likely to report that their teachers helped them and listened to their views. In addition, they were somewhat less likely to see discipline within school as fair. Peer effects were also evident: early leavers were more likely to experience a context where the class was disorderly and where their friends did not take schoolwork seriously. They were also less likely themselves to consider schoolwork worth doing.

Figure 3.15: Attitudes to School Among LCA Completers and Non-Completers



Source: School Leavers’ Survey, various years; all differences significant at $p < .10$ level.

In the School Leavers' Surveys, young people were asked why they left school before completion. Data are available from two surveys but the questions differed in their format. In 2004, the main reason given for leaving among LCA leavers were school-related factors (44 per cent) compared with a third who cited economic or work factors. LCE/LCVP leavers were more evenly split between school and work factors (28 per cent and 29 per cent respectively). A more detailed breakdown of reasons was provided in the 2006 survey but once again school-related factors were to the fore. LCA leavers were more likely than LCE/LCVP leavers to attribute their leaving to finding schoolwork boring (45 per cent v. 20 per cent), finding schoolwork difficult (22 per cent v. 5 per cent), and not getting on with their teachers (19 per cent v. 15 per cent). As in 2004, they were less likely than LCE/LCVP leavers to cite wanting to get a job as the reason for leaving (34 per cent v. 49 per cent).

Five of the young people who took part in the qualitative interviews had left school before completing LCA. These respondents had generally intended leaving school after their Junior Certificate but were persuaded to stay by parents and/or teachers. Most of this group had part-time jobs and had missed school days during their time in LCA. These young people were generally motivated to leave by the attractions of paid employment rather than a negative perception of the LCA programme:

I didn't leave because of the fact that LCA was pissing me off or anything like that, was bringing me down. ... The reason I left was because I got a job in a timber factory and that was the main reason I went into LCA because I knew I was going to do a trade. (Jack, 23, dropped out of LCA, employed)

Peer influences were also evident for young people who compared their economic situation to their friends who were in paid employment:

I started hanging around with a few older fellas like ... they were all working and they were on big money and I was just, you know, starting to go out to the pub and that. And I didn't have that much money myself and you know, to go out, so I was thinking about leaving and getting an apprenticeship or whatever. (Garry, 22, dropped out of LCA, employed)

In contrast to the experiences of these young people, a number of respondents reported that they had considered leaving school after junior cycle but stayed because of the LCA programme (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion). Thus, a number of young people who had completed LCA attributed their staying on in school to the nature of the programme. Graham, for example, reported that:

It was the only reason I stayed in school for two years. (Graham, 22, completed LCA, apprentice)

Similarly, one respondent reported that their prospects would have been bleak in the absence of the LCA programme:

I probably would have left school and probably would have went down an awful dark road. ... I probably would have been into drugs, more than anybody I'd say because a lot of them were falling into that hole. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

In sum, around a third of young people taking LCA do not complete the programme. Like other early leavers, they are motivated by a mixture of the positive attractions of paid employment and their negative experiences of school. Analyses in a later chapter indicate that young people are generally very positive about their learning experiences and interaction with teachers during LCA. A number of respondents thought that LCA had facilitated their staying on in school. However, some young people had already formed a view about leaving school before making the transition to senior cycle. It may be more difficult for the programme to re-engage this group, especially in the (then) context of available employment.

3.6 Conclusions

The proportion of schools providing the LCA programme has increased since its inception. However, whether a student has access to LCA depends on the school they attend since the programme is more commonly provided in larger schools catering to more disadvantaged populations. Provision patterns, therefore, reflect the perceived suitability of the programme to the student cohort as well as logistical constraints for smaller schools.

Overall around 7 per cent of the Leaving Certificate cohort take the LCA programme. Take-up of the programme varies significantly across the schools providing LCA. Take-up rates tend to be higher in vocational schools, smaller schools, schools serving disadvantaged populations and Dublin schools. The profile of those students taking LCA is discussed in the following chapter.

The LCA programme is targeted at young people who are at risk of educational underachievement and early school leaving. It is difficult to ascertain the extent of drop-out from LCA and even more difficult to assess whether more young people would leave school early in the absence of the programme. Many of the young people interviewed for this study indicated they would most likely have left school before completion if they had taken the established Leaving Certificate programme. However, it is clear that a significant number of young people do not complete the LCA programme and that they, like other early leavers, are motivated by a combination of a rejection of their school experiences and the attractions of paid employment.

4. PATHWAYS INTO LCA

4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines what type of student takes the LCA programme and investigates pathways into LCA by junior cycle students. Using data from the School Leavers' Survey (2002-06), the longitudinal study of second-level students and qualitative interviews, this chapter first examines the social profile of LCA entrants in terms of demographic characteristics, social class and occupational and educational attainment levels at home. The multiple data sources have enabled us to devise five student typologies based on the main characteristics or motivations of LCA entrants which include students who: struggled with schoolwork in junior cycle, experienced behavioural problems, wished to enter the labour market, felt misdirected into taking LCA and finally those with special needs or learning difficulties in school. In the fourth section, we examine the reasons for entry into the LCA programme by focusing on the attractions of LCA for potential students and the main influences in student decision making. This section examines whether students base their decision to enter LCA on their own perceptions of ability or whether they are influenced by their teachers, schools or peer group.

4.2 Social Profile of LCA Entrants

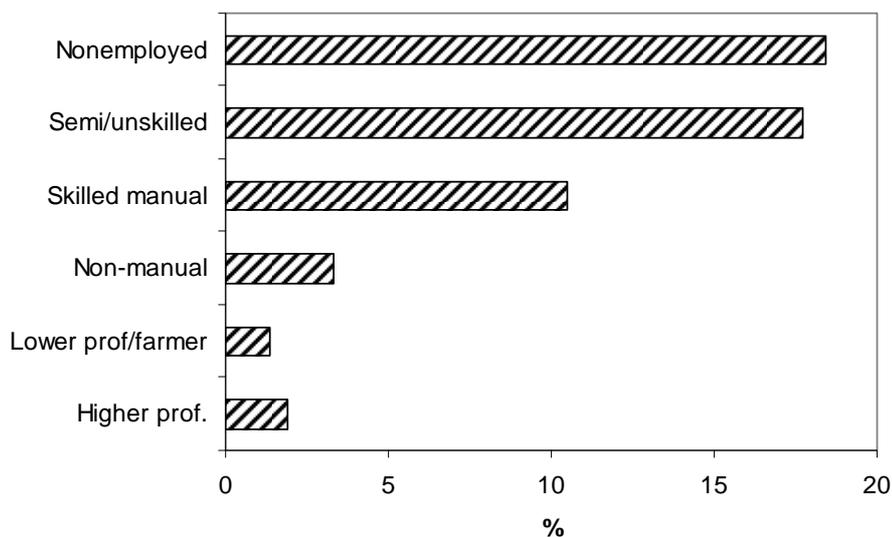
One of the objectives of the LCA programme was to provide for the needs of those students who were otherwise at risk of early school leaving or underachievement (see Chapter 1). In order to assess the extent to which the programme successfully targets this group of students, this section examines the profile of LCA participants in terms of their demographic characteristics, social class and the educational and occupational attainment levels within their family.

The longitudinal study of second-level students allows us to explore whether young people entering the LCA programme differ from those entering LCE or LCVP in any respect. Male students in the case-study schools are much more likely to take LCA than their female counterparts (8 per cent compared with 4 per cent), in keeping with the national pattern (see Chapter 2). Furthermore, LCA participants tend to be somewhat older (by 2 to 3 months) than those taking other Leaving Certificate programmes. Students from the Traveller community are more likely to take LCA than other students (24 per cent doing so compared with 6 per cent of the settled population). Ethnic minority students are somewhat less likely to take LCA than other students, but this pattern should be interpreted with caution due to the relatively small numbers of students involved.

International research has highlighted the influence of family background on students' educational chances (Gamoran and Mare, 1989; Shavit, 1990). Parents with higher educational qualifications are found to be

more likely to enrol their offspring in a general track, which leads more naturally to university (Brunello and Checchi, 2007). On the other hand, working class families may enrol an equally talented child in a more vocational curriculum (Brunello and Checchi, 2007, p. 784; Mare, 1981). Marked differences are evident in the social profile of LCA participants; almost 20 per cent of those from non-employed or semi/unskilled manual households take LCA compared with fewer than 2 per cent of professional or farming groups (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1: LCA Take-up by Social Class



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

In this study, the working-class social profile of the qualitative sample compares with the findings of the longitudinal study. Two-thirds of those interviewed came from unskilled or skilled manual households with the majority of parents working in trades and farming. Just one respondent came from a lower professional background and was advised to take LCA due to his autism (see Section 4.3.5). In addition to their parents' occupations, respondents spoke of their siblings' post-school pathways which were also predominantly unskilled and skilled manual jobs. Sarah's brothers and sisters did not have the option of LCA so completed the LCE and subsequently got jobs in construction:

They finished, they did their Leaving Cert but they never, you know, they didn't go into college or anything like that, they went into like, you know, labouring, all building, all that. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Siobhan's brother and sisters work in construction, hairdressing and childcare:

My older sister finished, she did the Leaving and my other sister didn't and the one that did the Leaving... Well she's her own hair dressers now

And then the other sister who left?

She's in childcare.

And your brother?

He didn't finish it either and he's in the buildings as well. (Siobhan, 25, completed LCA, employed)

Some respondents were reflective about their social class and how this may have impacted on their educational and occupational aspirations. When asked what type of area he grew up in, Jack described how his upbringing and aspirations to enter the construction sector contrasted with his friends at school:

A lot of factory workers in the area and stuff like that, whereas I went to school with young fellas whose mother and fathers owned the factory so it was different kettle of fish and I suppose...they were probably well schooled along the line of what they were going to be doing in ten years, whereas I was schooling myself and telling meself what I was going to do, you know, so, the construction area, there is obviously money to be made but not on the scale that you could in more educated roles such as lawyers and all this kind of thing, you know what I mean? (Jack, 23, dropped out of LCA, employed)

In terms of educational attainment at home, many respondents' parents and siblings had not completed second-level education or gone on to further education. Andrew's parents left school when they were young:

I don't think they even have a second-level education, I think me dad left school when he was twelve or something, thirteen. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

Some of the respondents' older brothers and sisters had dropped out of school after the Junior Certificate and started working in trades. Sarah thought it was easier for her brother to get a job after the Junior Certificate:

Why did your brother leave school?

I suppose he got a job as a carpenter and he just started doing his trade then.

Was he glad he left?

Yeah, he was actually, yeah. I suppose the Junior Cert's enough for lads, isn't it? Walk into jobs easy. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Interestingly, a number of those interviewed were the youngest or the second youngest in their family where there seemed to have been a shift in educational aspirations between the eldest and the youngest child. Jackie and her younger sister had always planned to do the LCE and go to college despite the fact that none of their older brothers and sisters had finished second-level school:

I'm the second youngest, I have a little sister after me that's it. So none of my older brothers or sisters they didn't do their Leaving. They left after 3rd year, my brothers went out working and my sisters were like you know...

So you were more dedicated?

I was yeah, yeah me and my little sister were like really wanted to get into college and get you know you can get a good job. (Jackie, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

All of Andrew's three brothers dropped out of school so he was the first boy in the family to complete second-level education. At the time of interview he was completing his apprenticeship:

Me Dad wants me to get it [apprenticeship] and me Mam said they'll be delighted if I get it, because there's no one in it, my dad's a qualified painter like, so, me brothers haven't really got any trades, me sister's, yeah she's, she was working as an assistant secretary or something like that for, where I'm not sure...So it'd be a great achievement. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

In cases where older siblings had gone on to further education there appeared to be a positive impact on respondents' post-school pathways. At the time of interview Linda was studying in an Institute of Technology. She was influenced by her brother who had gone to college and had given her advice on what to do:

My brother, he done university for seven years, he works in Dublin, accountant, he does, he works in a finance place in Dublin, he's a manager there like, and yeah, he done really well. And then the others all do different jobs like, tiling and you know, stuff like that, you know. I'd say [brother's name] got the most education out of everyone. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

To summarise, the analyses shown in this section indicate that LCA participants have quite a distinctive profile compared to students entering other Leaving Certificate programmes. They are much more likely to be from working-class, semi/unskilled manual households and tend to have similar educational and occupational aspirations to their parents and siblings. The next section explores LCA student profile in more detail by analysing the types of students who take LCA and the motivations and influences in their decision making process.

4.3 Characteristics of LCA Entrants

In order to create typologies of students who enter LCA, we identified five types of students who take LCA. Respondents are categorised according to their primary characteristics, although it is acknowledged that some have more than one distinguishing feature when entering the programme.

These include students who:

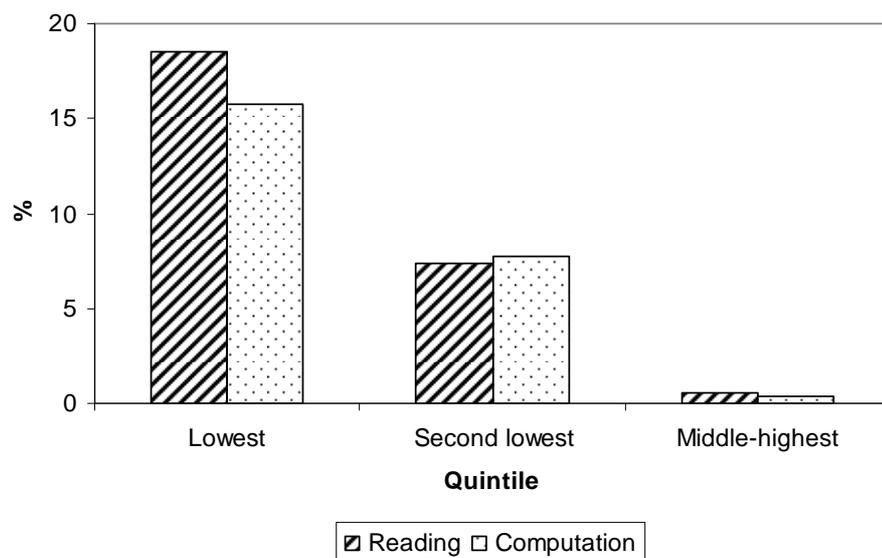
- Struggle with schoolwork at junior cycle;
- Have special needs or learning difficulties;
- Experience behavioural problems during junior cycle;
- Wish to enter the labour force;
- Feel misdirected in entering LCA.

These categories enable an analysis of the types of students who take LCA and the main pathways into LCA from junior cycle. This allows us to assess whether the LCA is being taken up by those it was designed for (those at risk of early school leaving or underachieving) or if the dynamic of uptake has changed so that it is now meeting needs it was not originally intended to meet.

4.3.1 STUDENTS WHO STRUGGLE WITH SCHOOLWORK IN JUNIOR CYCLE

As might be expected, data from the longitudinal survey shows differences between LCA and non-LCA in junior cycle and in particular, that the take-up of LCA is strongly related to Reading and Mathematics ability on entry to first year (Figure 4.2). Almost a fifth of those from the lowest reading quintile go on to take LCA compared with 8 per cent of those from the second lowest quintile and less than 1 per cent from the three highest quintiles.

Figure 4.2: LCA Take-up by Reading and Maths Ability on Intake



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

The qualitative interviews also highlight student difficulties with English and Mathematics in junior cycle. Half of those interviewed described being weak at these subjects. Justin specified the core subjects as the areas which caused him most difficulty:

Mostly Irish and English and that, and Maths, that's what I found hard.
(Justin, 22, completed LCA, employed)

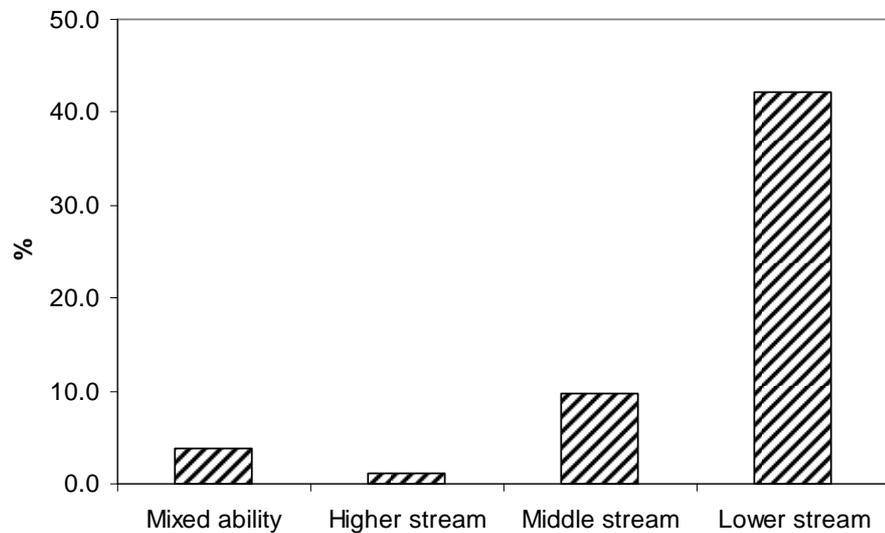
Andrew also experienced difficulties with Maths and Irish:

Yeah my Maths was very, wouldn't be the greatest and just stuff like that, Maths and Irish basically, I found it very difficult. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

LCA take-up is also related to the streaming of classes in junior cycle. Within streamed schools this means that students of similar assessed ability are grouped into classes ranked 'higher' to 'lower'. The longitudinal study shows that over four in ten of those in lower stream classes go on to take LCA compared with a tenth of those in middle stream groups and very small proportions of those in mixed ability or higher stream classes (Figure 4.3). In mixed ability schools, however, LCA entry is not associated with students who struggle to keep up with the pace of instruction. However, since streaming is thought to lead to lower student, and often teacher

expectations, students from lower streams in junior cycle are more likely to enter LCA (Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database).

Figure 4.3: LCA Take-up by Ability Group



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

The qualitative interviews highlight the role of the school in selecting students specifically from lower streamed classes into LCA. The majority of those interviewed had attended schools with streamed classes from first or second year and thought the school did not approach middle and higher streamed groups regarding LCA entry. Some respondents believed their schools simply approached lower streamed classes with the option of LCA. Linda's school had streamed classes throughout junior cycle and out of five classes she was placed in the middle class. She explained how the career guidance counsellor had not visited the two highest streamed classes to talk about LCA:

I was [class] three anyway, our group was three you know, there'd be like, one to five, five would be like highest level... I'd say four and five because I knew a couple of girls that were in four and five and they said no, like, the career guidance teacher wasn't in with us, he could have went in from three to one, you know what I mean like, to see if we'd do the course like. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

Sandra also thought that only lower streamed classes were targeted even though she felt students in other classes wished to take LCA:

Well the way we took it, and even now when I still think, you think were we in the lowest class that's why we were brought into it like, you know, say people that were in the A classes, why weren't they brought into it like, like when a few of them did want to do it like, you know. (Sandra, 23, completed LCA, home duties)

The role of teachers, guidance counsellors and principals in respondents' decision to take LCA is examined further in Section 4.4.

Somewhat surprisingly, the longitudinal data found that overall academic self-image of the students, that is, their perceived capacity to cope with schoolwork over the course of the junior cycle, is not significantly related to LCA take-up. In third year, students who went on to take LCA were just as likely as other students to agree that they were ‘doing well at this school’ or that ‘the schoolwork is quite easy in this school’. However, when LCA entrants were asked to compare themselves with other students in the school, they were much less likely to report that they were doing as well in their schoolwork (65 per cent compared with 86 per cent). Furthermore, they were much more likely than other students to report that they had trouble keeping up with their schoolwork (41 per cent compared with 25 per cent). LCA entrants were also more likely to report that they had been ‘below average’ in schoolwork compared to other students in their year group (28 per cent compared with 11 per cent).

Perceptions of being ‘below average’ emerged in the qualitative interviews where respondents were reflective about their academic ability in junior cycle. Many felt they could not cope with their schoolwork in general. Deirdre felt that she was ‘bottom of the class’ when asked what she thought of school in junior cycle:

I hated it, being completely honest.... I wouldn't have been the best now in that school, I wouldn't have been the best now at all, probably, I just didn't enjoy it because like, I wasn't good at school at all...different subjects I would have been always kind of bottom of the class, you know that kind of way, I just didn't enjoy it at all. (Deirdre, 22, completed LCA, unemployed)

Anne disliked school and struggled with her subjects and studying in general:

I just hated the, see, I'm not good at studying and it was all studying, I couldn't, I just couldn't concentrate on the book like. (Anne, 21, completed LCA, employed)

When asked whether she liked school during her junior cycle, Mary described how she found the whole experience stressful and felt that school did not suit her:

I hated it...I'm not really a school person, I don't mind it, it was just the pressure, I don't work well under pressure, if I'm left to do my own thing I work a lot better. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Despite these negative experiences, the longitudinal data show that students entering LCA do not differ markedly from other students in the extent to which they report liking school over the course of the junior cycle. The exception to this pattern is somewhat less positive attitudes to school at the end of first year than other students. LCA entrants are somewhat less likely to have found schoolwork interesting in third year (though the differences are not marked) and significantly less likely to agree that they ‘like school better than other students’ (16 per cent compared with 30 per cent).

The qualitative interviews also highlighted the end of first year as a period when students began to disengage from school. This may reflect the end of a “honeymoon” period and the fact that students are becoming

more realistic about their ability to cope with schoolwork at second-level (Smyth, Darmody and McCoy, 2004, p. 243). Respondents reflected how it was during the transition from first to second year that they began to struggle with their schoolwork and experience behavioural problems. This was particularly evident for respondents who subsequently dropped out of LCA. Some commented on the increased pace of instruction and workload and others referred to changes in their peer group which often resulted from re-streaming of classes in second year. Roy, who dropped out of LCA in fifth year, began to struggle specifically with Maths at the end of first year:

They started doing algebra and something like that and that's too hard and Technical Graphics, I couldn't do that at all. (Roy, 22, dropped out of LCA, unemployed)

During his first year, Garry found his school work was manageable but began to experience difficulties at the beginning of second year. It was at this point that he began to recognise his preference for practical subjects:

It kind of changed again, like the work itself was getting harder in second year like, I found the subjects, I was kind of falling behind in. Science was really hard, what else, I liked Metalwork and Woodwork. (Garry, 22, dropped out of LCA, employed)

In some cases respondents' academic difficulties coincided with classes being re-streamed at the beginning of second year. Zoe had liked second-level school in first year but found schoolwork much harder in second year. Separated from her friends she found the reshuffle of different classes disruptive:

The start of it was alright but then I just started to hate it...it just started getting too hard and I was like, you know, I don't like this....Everything started changing again, you know, new people were coming into the class, people were getting moved up and down. (Zoe, 22, dropped out of LCA, unemployed)

In relation to homework, longitudinal data show that those who went on to LCA had generally spent less time on it than other students (56 v. 89 minutes at the beginning of first year, 57 v. 86 minutes at the end of first year, and 70 v. 114 minutes in third year). Interestingly, this pattern does not apply within second year (85 v. 92 minutes), perhaps reflecting a pattern of 'drift' more generally among this cohort.

One interviewee felt she did the bare minimum of homework in order to get through classes in junior cycle. When asked about homework in junior cycle, Fiona recalled how one hour's work would take her ten minutes:

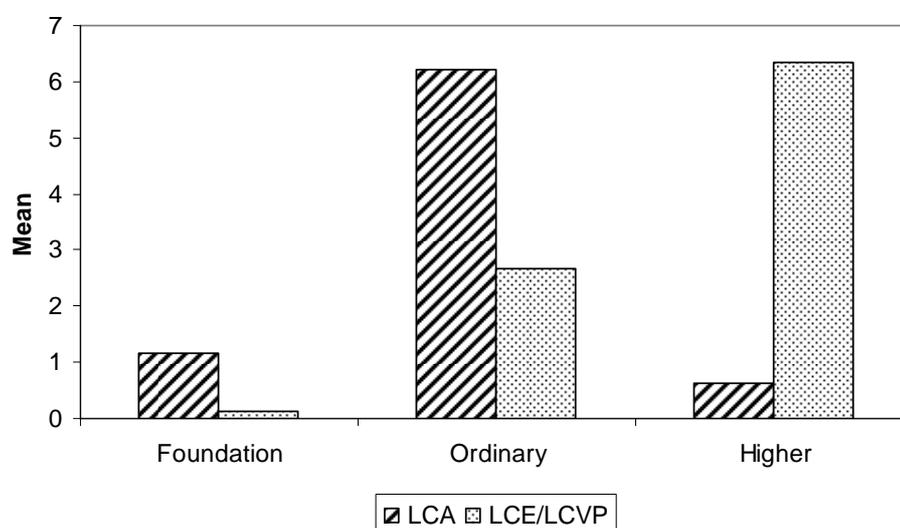
I'd do it like, I'd do it for the sake of doing it, so I'd go home like, it'd just be like, it wouldn't be a struggle like because I'd just do it within ten minutes. It was supposed to take an hour and a half but I'd be doing it in ten minutes and then I could just go out like. (Fiona, 25, completed LCA, employed)

The longitudinal study also shows that students who received learning support in third year were much more likely to go on to take LCA than

other students (34 per cent doing so compared with 3 per cent of other students). Of those who received frequent help from their family with homework or study in third year 13 per cent went on to take LCA compared with 5 per cent of those who received occasional help and 4 per cent of those who did not receive such assistance. In contrast, LCA entrants were about half as likely to have taken grinds in third year; 15 per cent had done so compared with 28 per cent of other students.

Students' subject levels and grades also differ between LCA and other Leaving Certificate programmes. Students who go on to take LCA were more likely to take subjects at foundation or ordinary level, and much less likely to take subjects at higher level, than those entering the LCE or LCVP programmes (Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4: Mean Number of Subjects Taken at Different Levels by Programme Taken



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

As might be expected, students who achieve lower grades in their Junior Certificate examination are more likely to go on to take LCA than other students; LCA participants had scored an average of 4.4 grade points (out of a maximum of 10) per subject compared with an average of 7.3 among LCE/LCVP participants. Dividing students into quintiles based on their Junior Certificate grades, we find that 27 per cent of the lowest quintile take LCA compared with 6 per cent of those in the second lowest quintile and none of those in the highest three quintiles.

Examined in the next section is another group of LCA entrants who had learning difficulties during junior cycle which influenced their entry into LCA.

4.3.2 SPECIAL NEEDS LEARNERS

Evidence from the School Leavers' Survey (2002-06) also shows that LCA students are twice as likely to suffer from chronic, physical or mental health problems (6.9 per cent to 3.4 per cent) than students in other Leaving Certificate programmes. The position of special needs learners in LCA has been highlighted in studies by the Joint Managerial Body for Secondary

Schools (NCCA, 2008, p. 16) and Farrell's (2007) research on LCA participants. Farrell found that in one Dublin school with an LCA class of 17 learners, seven were special needs learners and three had special needs assistants to support them in the classroom (Farrell, 2007).

Within the qualitative sample of this study, it appeared that the LCA was being used by some schools to cater for the needs of students with learning difficulties in junior cycle. All of the respondents with special needs were advised by teachers, principals or guidance counsellors to take LCA as a more suitable alternative to the LCE. Maurice has autism and was severely bullied throughout his second-level education. He had planned to do the LCE but was approached by the deputy principal and advised to take LCA:

The deputy principal came in and just said okay there's Transition Year, there's the LCA, so you should do one of them after the Junior Cert, yeah.

Did you ever consider doing the ordinary Leaving Cert?

Yeah I was going to do the ordinary Leaving Cert but then I had a word with the deputy principal one day, he came up to me in the middle of the corridor and he was like, you're very good at computer Maurice and I think you should do the LCA, based on something along them lines.

Did you look it up or investigate it [LCA] any further then?

No. (Maurice, 21, completed LCA, student)

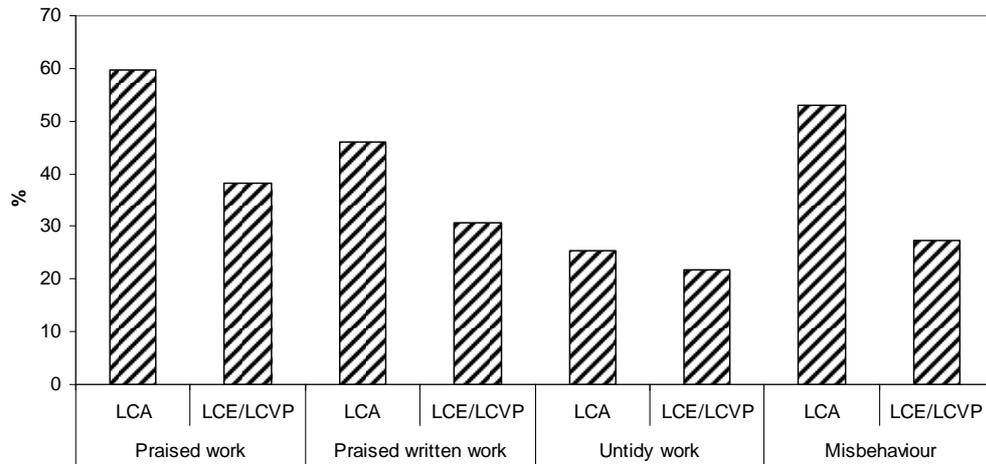
Maura had a mild learning disability in school and struggled with reading both in primary and second-level school. Her teachers in junior cycle recommended that after her Junior Certificate she move to a school which catered for students with special needs. She explained how during junior cycle she had felt 'ashamed' and 'out of place' because of her learning difficulties. Maura feels her teacher explained the LCA to her class clearly and she immediately knew it was what she wanted to do:

He said like modules and like we'd projects and all these, doing, in each subject there're kind of modules to do in each kind of area in like...When I heard that then, because I'm not much good with studying, like I'm more into my hands, practical work, when I heard that I was like suits me fine like. (Maura, 24, completed LCA, employed)

4.3.3 STUDENTS WITH BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS IN JUNIOR CYCLE

Those who go on to take LCA tend to have more negative interaction with teachers at all time-points over the course of junior cycle. Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, they also tended to have more positive interaction with teachers in second and third year, with differences in the frequency of praise received for class and written work among students. On closer inspection, this pattern relates to the high proportion of lower stream classes who enter LCA and who had high levels of positive and negative interaction with teachers because of smaller class sizes. Figure 4.5 shows the reported patterns for third year students; those students who go on to take LCA were more likely to have been given out to for untidy work or for misbehaviour than other students.

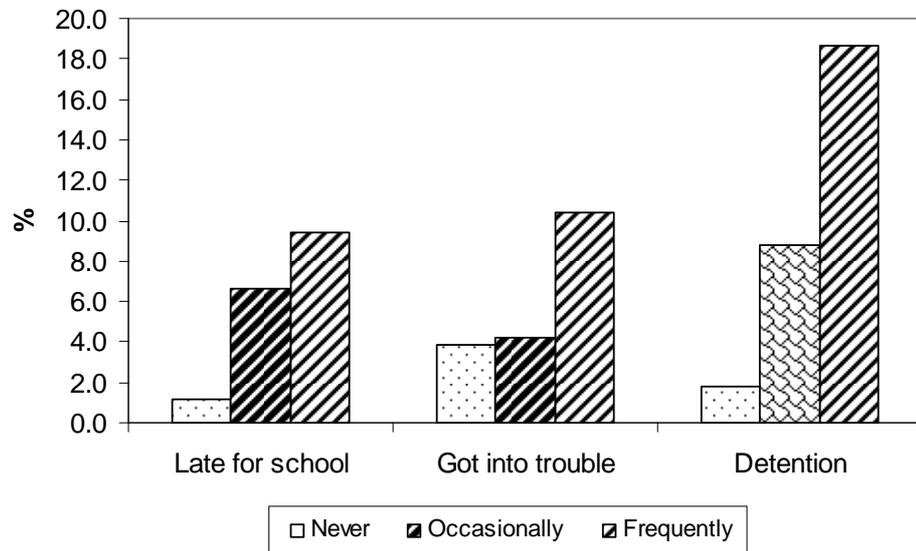
Figure 4.5: Pattern of Teacher-student Interaction Among Third Year Students Comparing LCA Entrants to Other Students



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

Students who went on to take LCA had higher levels of misbehaviour in second and third year (but not in first year). In third year, those who reported being frequently late for school, getting into trouble for misbehaviour or receiving detention were significantly more likely to enter LCA than other students (Figure 4.6). Being suspended from school was also associated with LCA entry; a quarter of those who had been suspended in third year took LCA compared with 4 per cent of other students.

Figure 4.6: LCA Take-up by Frequency of Misbehaviour



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

On reflection, the majority of those interviewed felt they had no behavioural problems in junior cycle. Respondents recalled being quiet in class, ‘giving no trouble’ and trying to get through their classes as best they could. However, academic difficulties often resulted in a withdrawal from school and led to some of this group missing classes, days and in some cases weeks from school. Significantly, all five of those interviewed who

had dropped out of LCA had poor attendance in junior cycle. Donal's absenteeism eventually led to him dropping out of LCA at the end of fifth year. During his third year of junior cycle, he was missing weeks from school at a time and attending the local gym on his own instead:

In third year now it was very bad, I missed about, about two months of school altogether, two maybe three months, I can't remember exactly. (Donal, 23, dropped out of LCA, apprentice)

Friends were a major part of this process of absenteeism and Zoe recalled how she would meet up with friends on the way to school. This situation worsened and by third year she had missed almost half the school year:

You'd be walking down to the school, I'm not going in today, neither am I, there'd be people sitting on the wall like, they'd be all having their smoke and all and you'd be like are you going in today and then they're like no, I've French first class, I'm not going in. (Zoe, 22, dropped out of LCA, unemployed)

Roy, who dropped out of LCA in fifth year, also missed long periods of school during his junior cycle:

I missed most school because I used to mitch it the whole time...I never went to school like, used to always just walk around town...or I'd go into the principal's office and say, ring them up and say, ring my mother and say Mam I've a cold, come up for me. (Roy, 22, dropped out of LCA, unemployed)

On reflection many respondents played down the extent of their misbehaviour believing it to have consisted of small 'clashes' with teachers which resulted in detention. Andrew described how he got into trouble for 'the usual' types of misbehaviour:

It was just normal school stuff, you know, missing, going on the bunk, or else just being late and the usual, detention and not doing homework maybe, you know, wouldn't say I was the perfect student. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

Sandra believed that much of the disciplinary problems she experienced were due to a strict principal in the school who she believed punished students for "silly things" such as incorrect clothes and jewellery:

Like everyone would [get into trouble] like, you know, for silly things, like you couldn't do anything, say in the school that I was in, say there'd be things you couldn't, like you couldn't wear your hair down, they wanted to have your hair tied up or you couldn't wear rings, you had to have your rings off, like there was silly things like , but it was like more, the principal like, he wanted to stand out as if he was strict like. (Sandra, 23, completed LCA, home duties)

Students who began to struggle with schoolwork at the end of first year (see Section 4.3.1) described how it coincided with the beginning of their behavioural problems in school. Rebecca was not sure why this happened:

When I went into first year I was great, as soon as I went into second year it was, just getting into trouble an awful lot. (Rebecca, 21, dropped out of LCA, home duties)

Roy experienced no problems in his first year but found that his behaviour and general disruption in the class worsened from second year onwards:

First year was grand, you know...just like listening, do everything and then...it took off from that...it all started, went crazy altogether then. Books would be thrown around the place, chairs, everything. (Roy, 22, dropped out of LCA, unemployed)

Some of this group referred to their peers as influencing their misbehaviour and disruption in class. Tim believed he was part of a group who had recurring disciplinary problems:

Well it was like you know, disruption, things like that, disrupting classes, throwing things around, because I got in with wrong crowd at one point.

Did you ever like have, to get suspended or anything like that?

A few times...I was in trouble like as well at lunch time and there was a few times I was arrested in school as well. (Tim, 21, completed LCA, unemployed)

The majority of those interviewed, however, felt they were quiet in school with no disruption to class and with a good record of attendance. Jackie reflected on how she gave her teachers respect at all times:

I was never in trouble, I never was cheeky or bold to teachers, I was always like decent and respectful to them. I always said hello and thank you and all that. (Jackie, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

It is interesting to note that many respondents felt they sat quietly in class in junior cycle, despite feeling 'picked on' by their teachers or 'ignored':

I didn't get along with the teacher, I think that's why I didn't, didn't like it like, it was like as if she always picked on me and all, you know so I just sat at the back of the class, didn't do anything...I wouldn't cause trouble, I was just sitting there. (Rebecca, 21, dropped out of LCA, home duties)

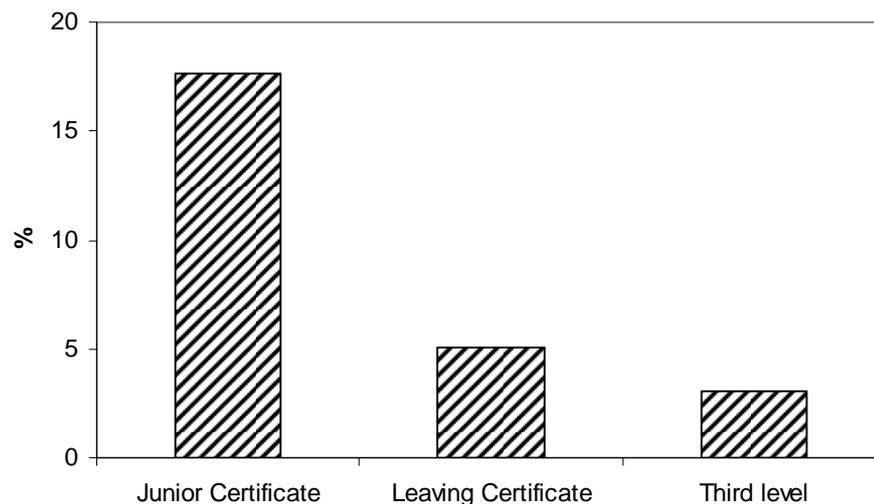
Most of them [teachers] just ignored you, like I used to have like, you know the walkmans on, you know listening to the music in class, I'd have my hood up and walking around and the teacher would...just say nothing like you know. (Roy, 22, dropped out of LCA, unemployed)

4.3.4 STUDENTS WHO WISH TO ENTER THE LABOUR MARKET

We identified young people who wish to enter the labour market as another category of LCA entrant. This group does not intend going to college and does not want or feel able to complete the LCE. The longitudinal data show that students who take LCA tend to have lower educational

aspirations before entry to the programme than other students (Figure 4.7); almost 20 per cent of those who intended to leave after the Junior Certificate (but stayed in school) went on to take LCA, compared with 5 per cent who intended to take the LCE and 3 per cent who aspired to third-level qualifications. When asked about their immediate plans after the Junior Certificate, intending to leave to find a job was predictive of LCA entry (with 24 per cent of this group doing so) as was intending to leave to take a course (19 per cent).

Figure 4.7: LCA Take-up by Educational Aspirations



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

When questioned about their educational aspirations, many respondents stated they saw the LCA as a programme which would enable them to finish school and avoid the LCE:

I think the reason I went into it was because I didn't see the point of doing the Leaving Cert because I had no intentions of going to college. (David, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Tim intended doing the LCE until, approximately two months before his Junior Certificate exams, he heard about the LCA and, in particular, the work experience component of the course. He never intended to go on to further education and was attracted to the LCA as he saw it as a way of improving his job prospects:

I wanted to go straight into work after school, so...that's why I basically did the Leaving Cert Applied, because I knew it was going to get me more experience plus the work experience that we did in school, I could ask the employers that I did the experience with to take me on. (Tim, 21, completed LCA, unemployed)

The interviews highlighted the role of LCA in acting as a 'safety net', particularly for young males, who were at risk of dropping out and wishing to enter the construction sector after junior cycle. Graham wanted to leave school after his Junior Certificate as he did not see the point in doing the

LCE in order to learn a trade. Eventually he was persuaded by his parents and teacher to try the LCA for a year:

I was planning on finishing school and doing, you know, getting a trade like...I didn't know what the LCA was about like and then just the ordinary Leaving Cert wouldn't have done much for me because I didn't want to go for college, I didn't want points like.

When you told your parents, how did they feel about it?

Ah they weren't, because I was still so young like, that they didn't want me to leave like.

So were they encouraging you to kind of stay on?

And try LCA for a year. (Graham, 22, completed LCA, apprentice)

Justin felt that most people who 'doubted themselves' chose LCA over the LCE. He thinks he would have dropped out if there had been no LCA in his school:

There's a good chance if I didn't do the LCA I would've failed the Leaving Cert you know...I say I would have dropped out in fifth year.

Did many drop out even when you were there?

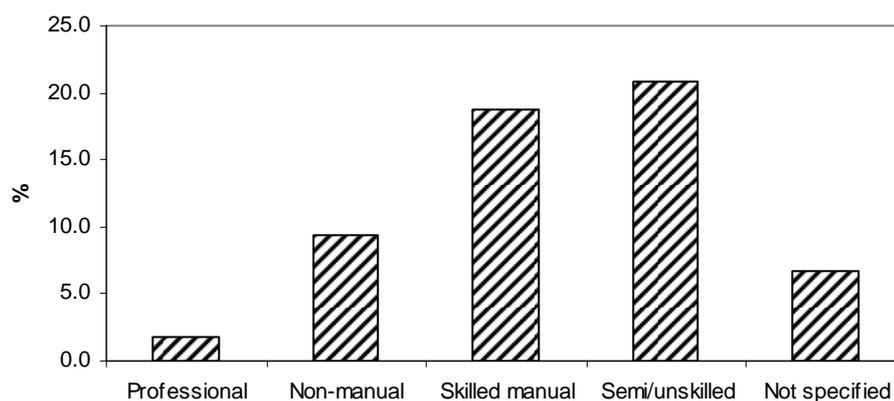
Well any person that was kind of doubting themselves went to the LCA like...

Did they all stick it out?

Yeah most of them bar one like. (Justin, 22, completed LCA, employed)

Occupational aspirations are also related to the likelihood of entering the LCA programme (Figure 4.8). A fifth of those who aspire to manual jobs in third year enter LCA subsequently while this is the case for a tenth of those who aspire to routine non-manual jobs and very few of those who hope to enter professional occupations.

Figure 4.8: LCA Take-up by Occupational Aspirations



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

The majority of those interviewed who wished to enter the labour market when they left school, aspired to manual jobs and saw the LCA as a programme which would prepare them for the world of work. Many of the male respondents planned on doing apprenticeships in junior cycle and chose LCA as a way of meeting with employers who could hire them as apprentices:

Well a lot of them [friends] wanted to go on to higher education, I didn't really mind because...all I wanted was a trade like...That's how I got involved with the person I was working with, because he took me on, on a Friday and that's how I got my apprenticeship, so I got help like. I changed to a few things as well like so, I went to different people as well like, I knew what I wanted when I left school, you know what I mean. (Justin, 22, completed LCA, employed)

The qualitative interviews also highlighted another group of students who entered LCA. Although small in number, a pattern emerged in the interviews where some young people felt misdirected into taking LCA by their school, teachers or peer group and subsequently regretted choosing the programme.

4.3.5 MISDIRECTED STUDENTS

Just over 10 per cent of those interviewed regretted taking the LCA due, mainly, to its slow pace of instruction, limited curriculum and restrictions in accessing third level colleges.⁶ Jackie, Linda and Deirdre felt misdirected into taking LCA and were critical of the selection process for students entering the programme. They felt that there was a lack of communication between schools and pupils about the content of LCA and its limitations in accessing third level colleges. This group felt they were misdirected by their schools and teachers who, they believe, should have recognised their ability to complete the LCE. Respondents did, however, recognise the strong peer influence in their decision to take LCA but in some cases suggested that teachers encouraged groups of friends who may have been regarded as 'troublemakers' to take LCA.

Jackie's experience is typical of the respondents who felt misdirected in their decision to take LCA. Despite being told about the change in curriculum and modular credit accumulation used in LCA, Jackie felt that she was not fully informed about the limitations of the programme for getting into third level courses. She explained how her whole class felt frustrated when they realised this limitation, particularly as it was too late to change back to the LCE:

We were told like we'd be doing assignments and tasks and stuff like that...and then we do a couple of tests at the end for sixth year and like it would be the same like, it would work out the same way doing the straight Leaving. I thought brilliant you know it would be dead handy like to do all the tests all year and just a couple of tests at the end. (Jackie, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Jackie was in her final year when she realised she could not go to college:

And then I realised that...we couldn't get the same points as straight Leaving, I couldn't get the course I wanted to do in college because I hadn't got the straight Leaving and we were told you know you have to do PLC or go back and do your straight Leaving to get into college and stuff and it was just I said what, we

⁶Access to higher education is restricted for LCA students who are not included in the CAO points system. Students can gain access to state training programmes in FÁS or Post-Leaving Certificate courses which can provide access to some third level courses.

weren't told that, it wasn't explained all that stuff. (Jackie, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

On reflection, Jackie felt someone should have explained the details of the LCA and assessed if they were suitable for the programme.

I think they should have just took me aside and said look [Jackie] this is the way it is, if you want to go on to college and get a good job you should do a straight Leaving...I think they should have explained it more to me that straight Leaving is more beneficial to me. It benefits more to me than the Applied Leaving because I was like a good student, like I sat and listened in class, I wasn't just sitting there or just you know talking. So I sat and listened I wanted to learn. And then they should have known that, because I'd most of the same teachers that I had in third year in fifth and sixth, they were there, they should have known that I was a good student, I'd listen and learn and study. They should have told me, not told me but explained that to me. (Jackie, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Deirdre regrets taking the LCA and feels she was misdirected by her teachers. She thinks that given the choice, 15 year old students will always decide on the 'easier option' without fully understanding the consequences of their decision. Although she enjoyed school in junior cycle and performed well in her exams, she struggled with some of her subjects and was attracted to the LCA as she heard it was 'easier going':

You get days off, you get to go out working, you get, they bring you away on trips and all, which they do and when you're fifteen and you're hearing that, you don't care, you know, you're not going to be thinking, oh shit, in two years I'm going to be finished school and I'm going to do something with this. (Deirdre, 22, completed LCA, unemployed)

Linda had not heard of the LCA before her career guidance counsellor came in to her Junior Certificate class and encouraged them to consider it. She believes she did not receive enough information about the LCA, in particular, the limitations of the qualification for entry to third level:

What do you think he missed out on telling you the most?

That after I finish...I couldn't get into courses because, I couldn't get into business and that because I didn't have points like.

When he was giving you that information, he didn't mention it?

Now it was short and brief when he came in and said it to us, because people were asking questions and stuff and he said when you finish it, it'll be usually based on distinction and merit and pass, and the normal Leaving Cert will be points like, but he didn't say you wouldn't get a good college course out of it, you know, so we just thought, it's probably the same like, it's just different, over the two years. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

Linda feels that giving students the option to take LCA at 15 years of age is a bad idea as they will invariably choose the easier route. She feels that LCA grades should count in accessing third level:

Just in general I just don't think it's a good course for people that age, you know, really I don't. I just, I think a lot of people probably will like it but a lot of people I know wouldn't like it, not at that age when you're given a choice to pick,

it should be just explained absolutely everything about it and after you finish you should be, if you pass with a distinction or something high, you should get into a good course like after, in college. So I think an advantage should be that there should be an option like. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

Other respondents, who were happy with the LCA overall, also felt misinformed about the limitations of LCA in entering third level. Mary was discouraged from going to college when she realised she needed the LCE in order to do the course she wanted:

What disappointed me was, that when you finish you can't really go into a college straight away and that was a bit of a disappointment because I think it makes you lazy then.

Were you aware of that when you were deciding?

No, well we were given other options...but what I actually wanted, I wanted to work with the special needs or old people where I would have had to take a year out and do a proper, my Leaving Cert over and go back then and try for college, which put me off altogether then. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Ronan developed an interest in architecture during his LCA work experience and, although he enjoyed the course overall, he was disappointed in sixth year when he found out that he could not go straight to college:

Basically just found it out in sixth year you know, you only find out when you start looking for colleges to go to, then you realise the marks you need for this and that and what college take people from LCA, because there is some colleges that don't, there's probably a lot of college that don't take [LCA]. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

It is possible using multivariate analysis of the longitudinal study (See Table 4.1) to explore the simultaneous impact of prior characteristics of students on their likelihood of entering LCA. The data show that female students are less likely to take LCA than their male counterparts and older students are more likely to take LCA. Working-class students and those from non-employed households are most likely to take the programme. In contrast, those from professional or farming backgrounds are very unlikely to take the programme. Evidence from interviews with young people also shows that occupation and educational attainment levels within their family influences their decision making process both in school and when they leave.

Table 4.1: Entry to the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme – Logistic Regression Model Contrasting LCA Versus LCE and LCVP (Combined)

| | LCA | | |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
| Constant | -9.054 ∇ | -8.369* | -1.221 |
| Female | -0.899** | 0.109 | 0.410 |
| Social class: | | | |
| Higher professional | -1.941** | -1.116 | -0.583 |
| Lower prof./farmer | -2.220** | -1.565* | -1.170 |
| Non-manual | -1.369* | -1.170 | -1.055 |
| Skilled manual | -0.375 | -0.210 | 0.262 |
| Non-employed | 0.099 | 0.085 | -0.573 |
| (Base: semi/unskilled manual) | | | |
| Age | 0.681*** | 0.434 | 0.363 |
| Reading score on school entry | -0.113*** | -0.092* | -0.086 ∇ |
| Class allocation in third year: | | | |
| Higher stream | | -0.976 | -0.754 |
| Middle stream | | -0.077 | -0.272 |
| Lower stream | | 0.858 | 0.369 |
| (Base: Mixed ability) | | | |
| Misbehaviour in third year | | 0.740** | 0.198 |
| Received learning support in third year | | 1.979*** | 1.537*** |
| Educational aspirations in third year: | | -0.929 ∇ | -0.950 ∇ |
| Leaving Certificate | | -0.404 | -0.283 |
| Sub-degree | | -1.238* | -0.600 |
| Degree | | | |
| (Base: Junior Certificate) | | | |
| Junior Cert Grade Point Average | | | -0.946*** |
| Nagelkerke R ² | 0.268 | 0.464 | 0.557 |

Note: From a logistic regression model, region not included as relates to 12 schools. *** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05, ∇ p<.10.

Source: Post-Primary Pupil Database.

Student ability in junior cycle is also important with those who had lower reading scores on entry to second-level school more likely to take LCA and more likely to have received learning support. In addition, students who were in lower stream classes are somewhat more likely to take LCA than those in other class types.⁷ LCA entrants are particularly unlikely to have degree-level aspirations and they also tend to receive lower Junior Certificate grades. Behaviour in third year also emerged as a factor from the analysis with those entering LCA having higher levels of prior misbehaviour. This was also highlighted in the qualitative interviews where the majority of misbehaviour is related to absenteeism and truancy (Darmody, Smyth and McCoy, 2008). As might be expected, Junior Certificate performance is significantly and negatively associated with LCA entry, and the effect of background and school experience on programme take-up is largely mediated through Junior Certificate grades.

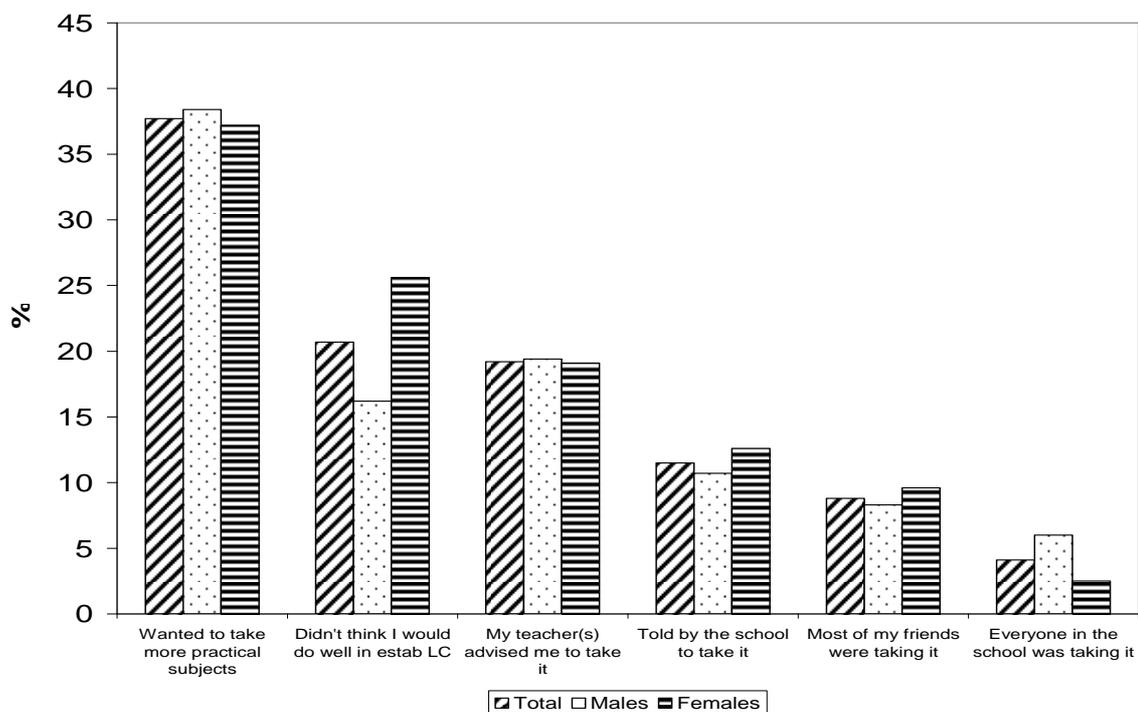
⁷ When LCA is contrasted against LCE rather than LCE/LCVP combined, the effect is statistically significant.

4.4 Entry into LCA

Using data from the School Leavers' Survey for four cohorts of school leavers along with evidence from qualitative interviews, this section examines the main reasons for students taking the LCA programme. Findings show that students' negative school experiences in junior cycle tend to influence their programme choice in senior cycle. Decisions to enter the programme appear to be based on feelings of low self-efficacy and self-doubt. Figure 4.9 shows that the main reasons for students taking the LCA appear to be based on their own perceptions of what they want, such as 'more practical subjects' or that they 'didn't think they would do well' in the LCE. Qualitative interviews show a degree of self-choice amongst respondents in their decision to opt for the programme. Many felt their parents had little influence on their decision. Other external reasons appear to factor in student's choice processes such as teachers, schools and peer groups (see also Darmody and Smyth, 2005; Hallinan and Williams, 1990).

The curriculum is the biggest factor in the decision to take LCA with just under 40 per cent of students stating they 'wanted to take more practical subjects'. The second most popular reason relates to student perceptions of their academic ability with a fifth of those surveyed thinking they would not do well in the LCE. Interestingly, a gender difference exists in student opinions of the LCE with females who chose LCA feeling less able than males (26 per cent compared with 16 per cent). Influences such as teachers and schools also play a significant role in student decision making with 19 per cent of students taking the LCA because their teacher(s) advised them to take it and another 12 per cent were told by their school to take LCA. The influence of peers in the decision making process is also significant with 9 per cent stating 'most of my friends were taking it'. Males are more likely to take LCA because 'everyone in the school was taking it' than females (6 per cent compared with 3 per cent).

Figure 4.9: Reasons for Taking the LCA Programme



Source: School Leavers' Survey 2002-2007.

4.4.1 WANTED TO TAKE MORE PRACTICAL SUBJECTS

Nearly 40 per cent of students are attracted to LCA because of the practical subjects offered. It is likely that this group struggled with academic subjects during junior cycle (see Section 4.3.1) and felt the practical nature of LCA, with its emphasis on preparing students for the world of work, would be more suited to their abilities. Many young people referred not only to the practical curriculum but also to the LCA's structure of assessment and teaching methods. Many of this group had recognised in junior cycle that they favoured practical over academic subjects:

I preferred more hands on stuff than actually written stuff and I was like anxious coming up to the Junior Cert, I was very upset. (Siobhan, 25, completed LCA, employed)

I didn't really like studying because it, I found it hard to, you know, to be attentive, I like to be doing something, you know, I like to work, to be moving all the time and actually doing something instead of sitting down for hours every night and trying to study...Just reading and hoping this is staying in my head, you know, I'd prefer to actually do something like...I find it much easier to learn by actually doing it, instead of reading it. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

Despite his brothers going to a different school, Derek's parents chose the local technical college for his second-level education as it offered a greater choice of practical subjects. He saw the LCA as a way of getting into an apprenticeship:

I went to the tech there and they had a lot of practical subjects, that's the reason I went to it and I wouldn't say I was a great student now but.

So even in primary school you knew that you wanted to do more practical subjects?

Oh yeah, definitely all practical because, I was never planning on college or anything so I said I'd go to the tech because it was more practical to get a trade. (Derek, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Sarah was interested in the practical nature of LCA, in particular the Hair and Beauty course. She had noticed the facilities for hairdressing training in the LCA classroom:

I'd seen, we have the classroom and all the hairdressing stuff and everything inside in it you know, we've got the sinks and they were always doing kind of practical work and you could see they were always doing projects and stuff and I was more interested in doing that, you know, going out finding out stuff rather than sitting there learning off a book that I'd never again want to even know about sort of thing. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

In addition to the practical curriculum, respondents were attracted to the LCA's modular credit accumulation. Many mentioned the stress of end-of-year exams during junior cycle and liked the option of building up credits over time:

That would encourage me to do LCA too, yeah... I thought it'd be a bit more probably easier than the way it was with the Junior Cert, having to think back on those three years and then to sit the exams at the end of year, I thought it was really stressful where with the LCA like it was very good and it helped you towards the exams at the end, you know. And you had actually exams every quarter in the year like. (Niamh, 21, completed LCA, employed)

What appealed to me was that the exams were sort of spread out over a long period, you know, with all the key assignments and all the assessments had to be added up, so that really appealed to me like because it was, it wouldn't be one big load of exams at the end of it. (Graham, 22, completed LCA, apprentice)

4.4.2 UNABLE TO DO THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE ESTABLISHED

A fifth of students chose LCA as they did not feel they would do well in the LCE/LCVP with females feeling less able for the LCE/LCVP than males. As Section 4.3.1 highlights, the take-up of LCA is related to low reading and Mathematics ability, negative attitudes towards school and low subject level and grades in the Junior Certificate. It is not surprising that many of this group do not think they would do well in the LCE and would prefer the vocational aspects of LCA. Fiona was not interested in taking the LCE as she felt she had 'never passed' her subjects in junior cycle and was afraid that the senior cycle would continue in the same way:

That's what put me off the Leaving Cert as well, like I've never ever passed. I remember the girls were doing honours in Junior Cert, I'd be looking at it, it was like looking at Japanese or something. (Fiona, 25, completed LCA, employed)

Tim and Justin found their Junior Certificate exams difficult and were concerned that if they took the LCE they would fail:

Would you prefer if you hadn't taken the LCA?

If I'd have took the normal Leaving Cert I'd have failed. (Tim, 21, completed LCA, unemployed)

I found them, I had heard that the Leaving Cert was hard like, so I didn't want to go and do the Leaving Cert and fail it, and get nothing out of it, so I done LCA and go for the Guards or something. (Justin, 22, completed LCA, employed)

Students' reasons for taking LCA appear to be based on their own individual preference for practical over academic subjects and their perceived ability in the LCE. Self choice also emerged in the qualitative interviews where respondents described how their family and in particular parents had little involvement in their decision to take the programme and in some instances were just happy they were returning to school after their Junior Certificate.

4.4.3 SELF CHOICE/LACK OF PARENTAL INFLUENCE

Many respondents' parents were unaware of the LCA programme and depended on their children for information on how it differed from other

Leaving Certificate programmes. Linda brought home information sheets about the LCA to her mother who knew very little about the programme. She felt her mother trusted her to make her own mind up:

I talked to my Ma about it, because none of the rest of them [siblings] done it, my Ma didn't know much about it and she just said are you sure like you want to do it and I just said yeah, I told her like and he gave us like sheets on Leaving Cert Applied and that, and I just showed them to her and she said that if you want to do it, you can do it, you know. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

Ronan recalled how his parents never tried to influence him and just wanted him to be happy:

They just said whatever you want to do, whatever makes you happy kind of thing...they never try and sway me like, whatever I feel like doing then, you know, I do it. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

Others felt their parents were simply relieved that they had decided to stay in school after junior cycle:

I told them like, but I didn't explain anything to her like what it was about or anything.

Did she mind that?

No, she was just happy that I stayed, that I was going back, yeah. (Rebecca, 21, dropped out of LCA, home duties)

I think he just wanted me to get a Leaving, you know. So that's what his big thing was, when he seen I was enjoying it sure he didn't mind, because I was enjoying it, it was good. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

Overall respondents appeared to make decisions independently of their parents even if there was parental involvement. This is not, however, taking into account that these decisions may be constrained or framed by school influences, social class or educational attainment levels within the family. Anne and her parents had a long discussion about whether she should take LCA and she explained how her father had reservations about it. Anne made her own decision about it in the end despite his concerns:

Dad didn't understand it now, he didn't want me to do it...he thought it was an easy way out or, it wasn't the same thing... so we spent about an hour and after an hour he said yeah, fine, do it.

Because you said you wanted to do it?

Yeah, I said look like, I'm doing it whether you like it or not kind of thing, because I was eighteen anyway, so I could do it. (Anne, 21, completed LCA, employed)

4.4.4 TEACHER/SCHOOL INFLUENCE

School personnel have an important role in shaping educational expectations and educating students (Andres *et al.*, 2007). The role of counsellors and teachers as brokers of information, support and assistance may be especially critical when cultural and social capital provided by parents and peers is limited (Andres *et al.*, 2007, p. 156). In this study, a third of students surveyed stated that their reason for taking the LCA was

because of advice from their school or teachers. The qualitative interviews showed the involvement of individual teachers, guidance counsellors, deputy principals and principals in student decision making. Although the selection process varied according to individual schools, students of lower ability, those placed in lower streamed classes and students with behavioural problems appeared to be approached by teachers and schools. There is also evidence that some students were discouraged from taking the programme by their teachers who felt they were capable of completing the LCE.

Some respondents recalled how they had been approached individually by the principal, teachers or guidance counsellors who encouraged them to take LCA. Sandra, Anne and Derek believed the school targeted certain pupils who they felt were suitable for the programme:

My tutor came up and he just said to me...that there's certain people that wanted to do the LCA group like, and she said, you're one of them that we'd like to do the LCA. (Sandra, 23, completed LCA, home duties)

So, she told me straight, if you want to do it, you do it, because it will be good for you she said, it's your type of thing. Better than studying books like, it's all projects, you know, tasks, it's all written projects, researching and stuff like that you see. (Anne, 21, completed LCA, employed)

We were the second year to do it in the school and I remember the principal came into the class and asked us what we'd prefer to do and she said to me and a few others, she knew like what we were like and she said it would suit us more than the normal Leaving Cert

When you say she knew what you were like, what do you mean?

We were, were great in our practical classes but any other classes we weren't great...to spread out the Leaving Cert over two years would be better. (Derek, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Some schools recognised that the LCA could prevent certain students from dropping out of school after junior cycle. Graham's guidance counsellor gave him the information about LCA and encouraged him to stay on in school despite him wanting to leave:

It was the guidance counsellor who told me, and he brought me in and said what are your options and all, what I planned on doing, I just said I wanted to leave, he just said would I try it for a year and I just said I might as well like you know.

What information did he give you about it?

I didn't know much about it but then when he talked to me it grew on me a small bit you know, all the subjects and the, it wasn't about the, how would you say, the education if you know what I mean, it wasn't about the points, there was no pressure of exams like, it was just learning a few more bits, it was more practical. (Graham, 22, completed LCA, apprentice)

Donal was in a lower streamed class in junior cycle. He believed that his group of friends were directly approached to do the LCA as they were 'troublemakers' in the school and it would be a good way to 'get them out

of the way'. He explained, however, that he had already intended to do the LCA anyway:

Did any of the teachers talk to you about it?

A few yeah, but they didn't mind you see, because we were the messers like, that as putting us out of the way really.

Do you think so?

Oh yeah, definitely, you know what I mean...It was the, the Year Head said it to us like but they kind of knew already even before, I'm going to go into that like.

Why do you say that?

They kind of more or less said it to us, go and do that, after your Junior Cert. (Donal, 23, dropped out of LCA, apprentice)

Mary also believed that the teachers and guidance counsellors approached students with behavioural problems and those at risk of dropping out of the LCE:

What about your teachers or the guidance counsellor, what were they saying about the LCA?

A lot of them were recommending it...To maybe the troublesome sort of group, they were saying maybe if you don't think you could stick out school would you not try this and the loud ones, the trouble makers were saying maybe this would be for you and not just them everyone else like. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

In a few cases, the qualitative interviews highlighted efforts by some teachers to discourage certain students from entering LCA. Jack ignored teachers who advised him to take the LCE instead of the LCA:

Did you talk to any of the teachers in school about it?

I remember my form teacher, you know, she'd be over you for first and second and third year, she wanted to, she said, I don't think you should do it, and I remember saying I don't like exams and I don't like, I don't know what I was doing, I should have listened to her. (Johnny, 23, completed LCA, employed)

Tim remembered some of his teachers discouraged him taking the programme and advised him of the limitations of the LCA for entering university:

There were a few advising me against it but I just said there's work experience and that could help me, so.

Why do you think they were advising you against it do you think?

Because like if I got, they said I went into the normal Leaving Cert then I'd be able to get, you know like, better qualifications going to university straight away and things like that, you know, get proper grades for things. (Tim, 21, completed LCA, unemployed)

In Andrew's school, some of the teachers from the LCE classes were made sure he was aware of the different style of teaching and learning used in LCA:

Ab they were warning me about it like saying, teachers from the other Leaving, the LCA, you know, it's a lot different and it's going to be doing fundraising stuff like, you know, for your exams and all, that's the sort of stuff we were doing, now out of our school activities and, they want you to really apply ourselves so, no messing, no nothing...yeah they were just being, being nice about it you know and telling me how different it was like and...I was with all my mates as well but when I found out what teachers were doing that like, that's what swayed me a bit more, yeah. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

4.4.5 PEER INFLUENCE

Grouping of students according to ability may have important consequences for student relationships. Thus students may be more open to influence from close friends who are similar to them in background and school experiences (Hallinan and Williams, 1990, p. 124). This study found that students' friendships and interactions during junior cycle, particularly in lower streamed classes shaped aspirations during the decision making process. Nearly 10 per cent of those surveyed stated that they chose LCA because their friends were taking it. Peer influence featured strongly in the qualitative interviews but not generally in isolation as many respondents felt there were combined factors which influenced their decision. Andrew, Jack and Ronan were influenced by their group of friends who had chosen the programme at the end of third year:

As far as I can remember...some of my mates had already picked it, without even saying anything and they, there was two spots left and I was like shit...you know, I was just trying to follow my mates to be honest, you know what I mean and I was talking with the year head and all and she was explaining the difference between LCA and the Leaving Cert, as much of me mates were in the Leaving Cert and when I seen how much difference it was then I just decided definitely, get me in there you know

Do you think you would have done the Leaving if you know, your friends hadn't been with you?

Yeah, I'd say so, yeah, maybe, they had a pull, we were always together like, we all stood together, you know. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

I was in two minds about doing the real Leaving Cert and that and when I found out that there was only one of my mates out of the whole lot of them doing it I said I'd rather I went to LCA and kind of, might get a buzz as well like. (Jack, 23, dropped out of LCA, employed)

It was definitely due to a lot of my friends taking it...we had kind of grown close over the last three years, you know and like, I didn't really want to go into another class with people I didn't really know too well, plus when they talked about it, it seemed pretty interesting. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

Fiona was reluctant to take the LCA as she believed there was a negative perception of the programme in the school. Some teachers were encouraging her to do it but she recognised that she could work harder and do LCE. It was not until she found out about her friends taking it that she made her decision:

I didn't want to do it because it only came, it was only like three or four years in the school.

Did you know anybody who'd ever done it before?

Yeah, but there was always this kind of very stereotypical view of it that people who did it were like....So [the guidance counsellor] said to me, oh I think this could be the best option for you, I was just like, no I don't want to do it. And then I was like, no, I'll work harder like and I knew that I had the ability to work harder, I just didn't want to because I was in school like. And then my friends ended up doing it as well and some of them weren't even asked, they really wanted to do it and I was like if they're all doing it, sure I might as well. (Fiona, 25, completed LCA, employed)

Barbara's decision was influenced by her group of friends who she felt had struggled with the same subjects as her in junior cycle and were attracted to the LCA to the pre-employment nature of the course:

There was a couple of us interested in doing it and same with my friend, she would have been in a lot of my classes as well, Irish, French...Struggling with the same stuff and because her cousin was doing it in [name of village] she said go, it's great. (Barbara, 23, completed LCA, employed)

An important feature that arose in the interviews, however, was the view of LCA as an 'easy option' by some respondents. Described as a 'doss', 'dead handy' or an 'easy ride', the programme was seen as a way of finishing school without homework, studying and stress. Linda and Donal felt that many of their classmates opted for the LCA because they thought it would be easier than LCE:

People thought it would be a doss two years, you know, people in my class anyway, that's the way a lot of them were acting as if it was a doss two years like, you know. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

Just doss, everyone thought it was a doss like. (Donal, 23, dropped out of LCA, apprentice)

All you do is go to school and you basically pass, so like, everyone was going to do that like, you know what I mean. (Roy, 22, dropped out of LCA, unemployed)

However, other respondents complained about this attitude to the LCA and believed that it prevented dedicated students from learning:

It stopped a lot of people like, we had four people on this side, four would be on this side say and we wanted to work and they were pretending it was a doss class, you know like what I mean like, back and forth. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

4.5 Conclusions

Merging data sources has allowed us to create a multi-layered profile of LCA entrants and gives a clearer understanding of common pathways into LCA by junior cycle students. The analyses shown in the first section indicate that LCA participants have quite a distinctive profile compared to students entering other Leaving Certificate programmes. They are much more likely to be from working-class, semi/unskilled manual households and tend to have similar educational and occupational aspirations to their parents and siblings. This pattern is consistent with international research on tracking, which indicates that working-class young people are more likely to take 'non-academic' educational pathways in differentiated systems. But the question remains open as to whether such routes are a 'diversion' (by reinforcing their trajectory into lower status jobs) or a 'safety net' (by protecting them from the consequences of educational failure in academic tracks).

Section 4.3 uses a typology of LCA entrants, which makes it possible to identify five common pathways of students into LCA. Classifying LCA entrants allows the assessment of whether the programme is reaching its objectives in attracting students at risk of dropping out and underachieving in the LCE. The LCA programme would appear to target the groups of students at which it was initially directed; those who have experienced difficulties with their schoolwork, those who are at risk of early school leaving, those who have disengaged academically and those who have had more negative experiences of school (in terms of misbehaviour and negative interaction with teachers). However, it is important to note that, while all of these risk factors enhance the likelihood of entering LCA, the majority of students in these categories take other Leaving Certificate programmes. In addition to students who struggle with their schoolwork in junior cycle, the programme appears to include students with special educational needs and learning difficulties. Students wishing to enter the labour market, particularly males wishing to enter trades, seem to use the LCA as a way to connect with potential employers when they leave school. Significantly, some students are misdirected into taking LCA by teachers and schools who have not provided them with adequate information about the LCA curriculum, assessment and its limited access to third level education. Thus the pathway taken by students reflects the programmes provided in the school they attend, school policy regarding LCA entry as well as individual student choice.

The final section examines the reasons for taking LCA. Of particular note is how the two most popular reasons given in the School Leavers' Survey relate to students' own preferences for practical subjects and perceptions of their ability. Students are attracted to the practical nature of the LCA curriculum and the option of moving away from stressful terminal exams to modular credit accumulation. In addition, as a result of negative experiences in junior cycle some students chose LCA as they did not feel able to complete the LCE. Interestingly, the qualitative interviews also highlighted self-choice in student decision making with respondents highlighting a lack of parental involvement in their decisions. Teachers and schools emerged as another influence with some respondents feeling that they were specifically targeted by their school or guidance counsellor to take LCA. On the other hand, however, some students were discouraged by teachers from taking the programme as they felt they (the respondent) would be able to take the LCE. Peers were another factor in student decision making and many of those interviewed reported that when they

realised their friends had decided to take the LCA they wanted to do the same. In some cases students had planned to do LCE but decided to take LCA on hearing of their friends' decisions.

5. SCHOOL EXPERIENCES AND LEARNING PROCESSES AMONG LCA PARTICIPANTS

5.1 Introduction

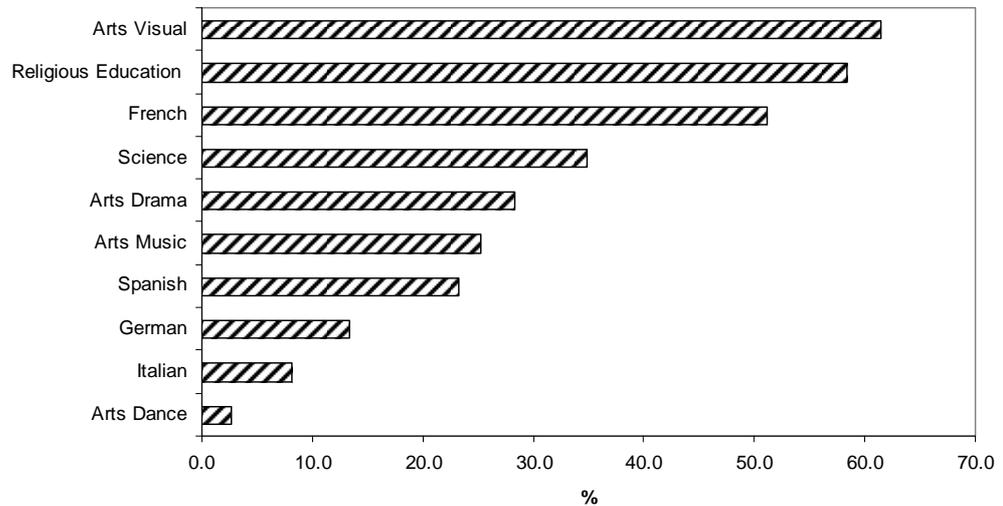
The use of active teaching and learning methodologies is seen as a key principle of the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. This chapter explores the type of learning experienced by LCA participants and the extent to which it differs from learning processes among other Leaving Certificate students. It draws on two sets of data – questionnaires completed by LCA and LCE/LCVP students during fifth and sixth year, and in-depth interviews with young people who had recently left the LCA programme. This enables us to provide a more holistic picture of school experiences and learning processes among participants. Section 5.2 examines young people’s perceptions of the content of the programme, while Section 5.3 explores the perceived standards of schoolwork. Section 5.4 explores the teaching methods used within the programme while Section 5.5 examines young people’s views of assessment within LCA. The nature of social relations with teachers and peers are examined in Sections 5.6 and 5.7 respectively. Section 5.8 explores the skills acquired through taking the LCA programme while Section 5.9 presents the conclusions.

5.2 Perceptions of LCA Programme Content

The LCA programme is quite distinct from other Leaving Certificate programmes in offering a combination of general education, vocational education and vocational preparation courses (see Chapter 1). As with other Leaving Certificate programmes, there is some variation between schools in the courses provided. The majority of schools provide Visual Arts and Religious Education as part of the LCA programme (see Figure 5.1). Science is provided in around a third of schools. French is the most commonly provided modern language in LCA, with access to German and Italian evident in only a small proportion of schools. Variation between schools is also evident in the provision of different vocational specialism courses (see Figure 5.2). Hotel, Catering and Tourism is the most frequently provided, being offered in over two-thirds of schools. ICT and Graphics/Construction Studies are provided in over half of the schools

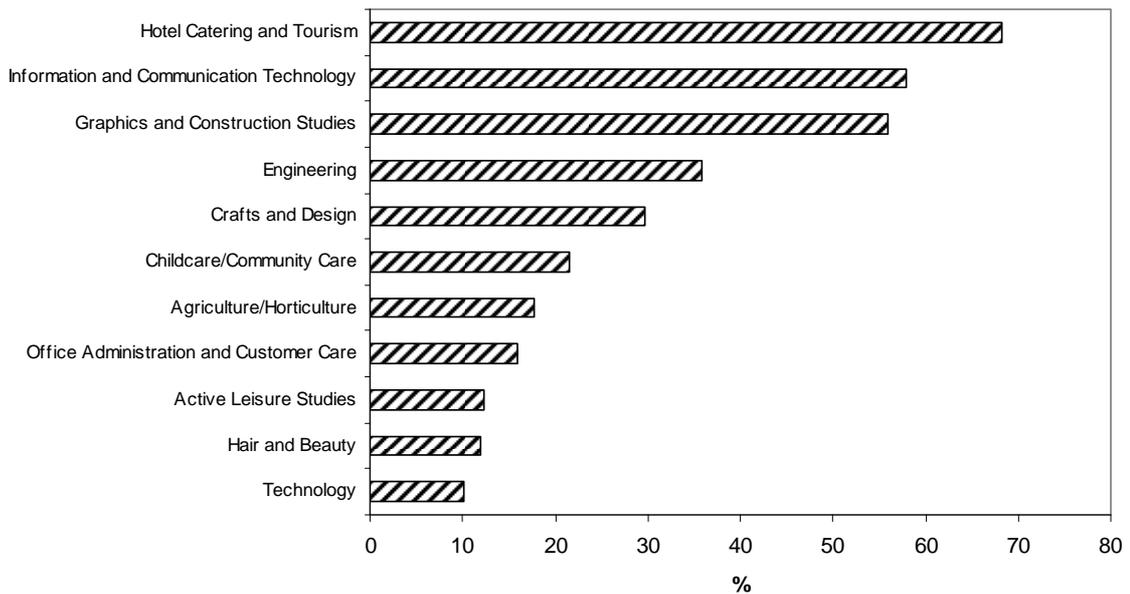
offering LCA, although access to many other vocational specialism courses depends on the school attended.

Figure 5.1: Proportion of Schools Providing Selected Subjects, 2007



Source: DES Education Statistics database.

Figure 5.2: Proportion of Schools Providing Vocational Specialisms, 2007



Source: DES Education Statistics database.

Previous research in the Irish context has indicated that students are more positive about subjects with a practical orientation and greater hands-on involvement, and that such approaches serve to foster student engagement in learning (Smyth *et al.*, 2007). In fact, access to ‘practical’ or vocational subjects was a motivation for many students choosing the LCA programme (see Chapter 4). The balance between subject areas was seen by the young people interviewed as better than in the other Leaving Certificate programmes:

Like maybe with the Leaving Cert you'd have French, Irish, Maths, maybe would be the three subjects that you hated, where with LCA you might have one subject you hated and then you will have three nice ones that you enjoy going to ... I think it was broken up way better than what the Leaving Cert was. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Many respondents referred to the skills and experience they gained from their involvement in the group business enterprise task:

They'd ask us as a class to do a fundraising event, you know and how to make money as a business, you know what I mean, to show that we could, you know, set up a little business and that, so we organise a committee in the class, who'd be the chairperson, who'd be the vice chairperson, then right down to who's the treasurer you know, so we organised, I can remember one, it was a football tournament for first years in the school ... and we all got to manage a team and all. It was just different now, it was exciting you know, you didn't realise how quick it was going either because you're enjoying it like, you know. Not really anyone would be coming into school saying oh, this thing's on today. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

We got told to do different projects and we made things and you know, there's a little business enterprise that we did ... we made and sold candles... I never used to be good at working out like Maths and doing things with businesses, but doing that little business enterprise it's kind of given me a little bit of a business mind. (Tim, 21, completed LCA, unemployed)

The vocational specialism courses were seen as having a more practical emphasis, thus enhancing the skills and knowledge of participants:

Well you have to go outside and plant stuff [in the Agriculture course], so you'd have to write about it as well and you know, it was mainly outdoor stuff and then you'd have to come in and you'd have to explain everything you done and you do presentations on it and stuff like that ... and I thought it was interesting, very interesting. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

Other respondents were drawn to the practical nature of the curriculum where they found they had the time and support to develop their confidence and experience across various subject areas:

I did a portfolio, an Art portfolio. ... There was another teacher, an Art teacher that took me at lunch time and she had me out to do a portfolio and I got my portfolio done and ... I was able to use that when I went to college, to get into college so, that was just a big, big bonus for me, it was a lot of hard work, but I got it done. (Barbara, 23, completed LCA, employed)

Going around sourcing stuff, pricing stuff for that, we got props for the back of the stage, got our costumes, we made a lot of our costumes and made a lot of the backdrops as well and yeah we did it for kids and we raised money then and we gave it to the home across the road and then they asked us to do the Christmas concert so then we did it then again for the Christmas concert, we used our whole stage for the whole thing, I found that was brilliant. ... Good experience, build

up your confidence, you know, life experience and you know, it was great, it was great now. (Barbara, 23, completed LCA, employed)

The development of computer skills and the time spent on ICT were also seen as positive aspects of the programme:

What did you like the most about the programme?

Computers, I was never good at computers but I got good at them there like.
(Donal, 23, dropped out of LCA, apprentice)

Social education emerged as another popular subject in the interviews. Many of this group responded to learning about contemporary social, political and environmental issues and enjoyed the freedom given to them to work on individual projects:

I used to love social studies, it used to be about real things you know. It used to be just things that I wanted to learn about more than anything. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

They brought us to, you know, Drink Aware, like AA meetings and all, to see what goes on, you know. ... I remember going to one that was about people who were all on heroin years ago like and they were trying to get off it and they were in a programme and were getting better, they were obviously getting better like you know and they told us about their experiences for a task, you know, it was brilliant, learned a lot from that like, you know. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

Most of the young people in our study had experienced difficulties in coping with more academically orientated subjects during the junior cycle. However, the content of, and approach to, some of these subjects in LCA was seen as rekindling their interest and engagement:

English was good as well, I learned a lot more in English than I did in the first three years of school. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

Like with the French now, we done the French project and ... like it was French fashion, French food, all about France and then the whole school was able to come in and see what we were after been doing. ... We enjoyed that because it was a boost. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

During the interviews it emerged that many respondents began to engage with schoolwork during the LCA. For many, a curriculum combining vocational and general education changed their view of school and allowed them more freedom in how and what they learnt. Instead of struggling with their subjects, respondents found that they were not 'dreading' certain subjects or school in general:

Say in Leaving Cert you would be dreading going into the classes, whereas there was no dreading going to school with the LCA like. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

The minute I started fifth year it was just I didn't mind getting up in the morning you know that kind of way. ... Before it was just like, you know, write, write,

write, write ... I suppose the fact that I was able to do the stuff and I wasn't struggling. (Barbara, 23, completed LCA, employed)

Although many young people were positive about the vocational focus of the LCA programme, others were critical of the limited nature of the LCA curriculum and many would have liked to have continued with some of their junior cycle subjects:

You don't do Science, you know, and if you wanted to go into that, you couldn't, so there is some subjects that they dropped that maybe they shouldn't. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

Similarly, Andrew, who went on to do an apprenticeship, regretted not being able to take Science while he was in LCA:

I could have done Science maybe, sure I'm only saying that now because I went on to do electrician. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

Some of the male respondents felt that the programme should further increase its vocational emphasis so that students would learn more specific occupational skills as part of the programme:

I'd change some subjects. ... I think they should bring in maybe trade work into it, which would be good, like different types of trades, you know, from carpentry to, well they do woodwork, to electricians to plastering, different trades like that I think. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

Young people taking LCA were less likely than those taking LCE or LCVP to report having a choice of subjects or modules. Some young people were critical of this lack of choice:

We'd no choice to pick, we were just given them subjects to do like, in the, so I would have changed that I think, given the choice to pick what you want to do in your LCA like. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

Similarly, Alice, who did not like Engineering felt that her class would have benefited from access to other subject areas:

A bit of choice, yeah. What languages you want to do or Engineering or even Woodwork would be more interesting, you know, you might find yourself making up a locker or something. You'd never want Engineering, you know, even if the boys done that and the girls done Woodwork, you know. (Alice, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

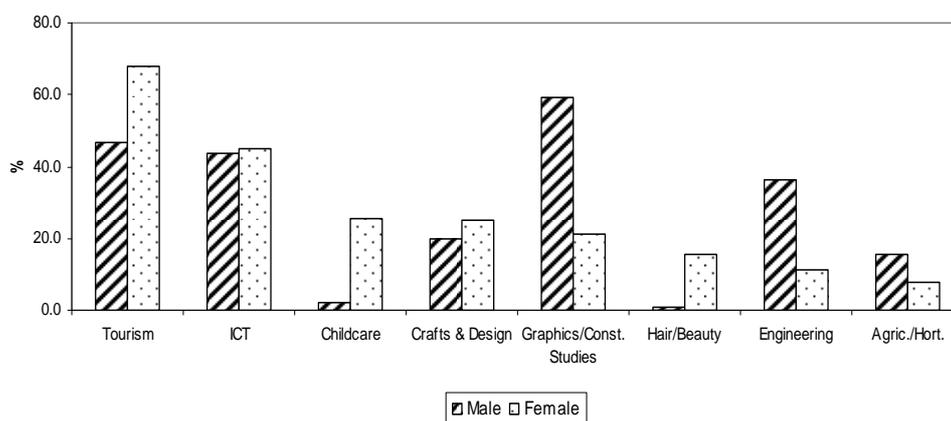
However, some acknowledged that this lack of choice most likely reflects the small number of participants on the programme:

They could only do this, that and that, I suppose there was only seven of us, if there was a bigger number they might have been able to offer more opportunities maybe, they couldn't offer us different subjects. ... There was only a certain amount of things we had to do ... Maths and all that, Construction, they were compulsory, everything was compulsory. (Johnny, 23, completed LCA, employed)

In contrast, some young people who had attended larger schools reported having more of a choice:

They gave us a choice, they had about eight different classes ... there was like drama and stuff like that, arts and crafts and things, so you picked your two favourite and then the majority of it came out. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Figure 5.3: Take-up of Vocational Specialism Courses by Gender, 2007



Source: DES Education Statistics database.

There appears to be a degree of gendering in the take-up of vocational specialism courses within LCA (see Figure 5.3). Childcare and Hair/Beauty are disproportionately taken by young women. Furthermore, while a significant minority of males take Hotel/ Catering/ Tourism, females are much more likely to do so. In contrast, Graphics/Construction Studies and Engineering are disproportionately taken by young men. ICT is the only vocational specialism course which appears broadly 'gender neutral' in profile. Such gendering was also evident among the study respondents; the most popular subjects for female respondents were traditional vocational subjects such as hair and beauty, craft and design and childcare. For male respondents, technology, construction and engineering were more popular. In keeping with previous research on gendered attitudes to technological subjects (Darmody and Smyth, 2005), some of the young women disliked the traditionally 'male' subjects, feeling they were too physically demanding as well as irrelevant to their longer term career plans:

That [Engineering] was horrible now ... us girls just couldn't do it like ... Even the lads would say it is a bit hard, you know, filing down metal you know, it's very hard. There was kind of no purpose to it, we were never going to be using that again. ... None of the girls liked that now. (Deirdre, 23, completed LCA, home duties)

We done Construction, Agriculture, like Construction I'd never think of doing that after. ... The Construction one now was, like you know, it was something that wouldn't even interest me now

And the other girls, would they be the same?

Yeah, all of them, like it wouldn't interest anyone like. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

However, one respondent noted that, as she attended a single-sex school, she did not have access to technological subjects:

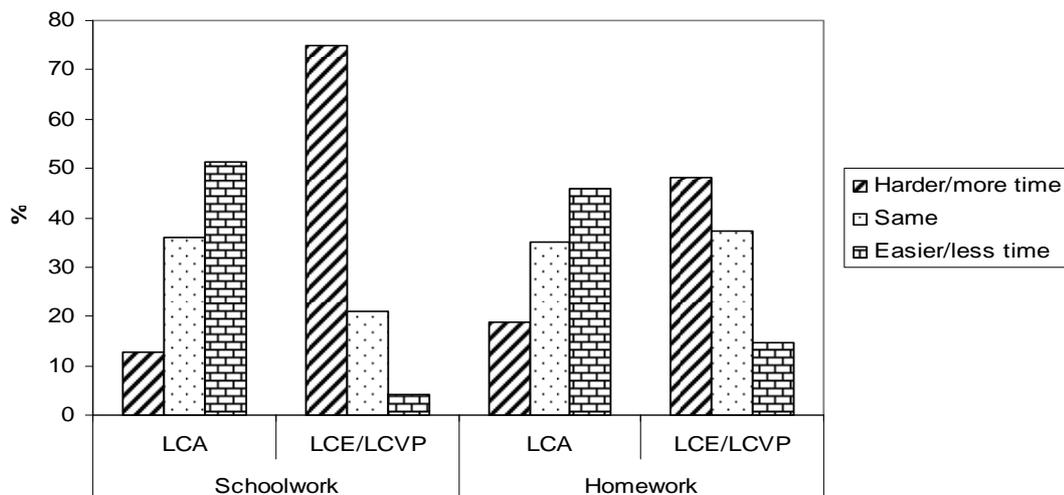
Was there some sort of woodwork or something? I think that would have probably been pretty cool to do, but obviously the girls aren't going to go for much of that. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

A significant difference in the nature and content of LCA compared with LCE/LCVP relates to the key place accorded to work experience. Two-thirds of LCA students reported having work experience during fifth year compared with 8 per cent of other students. Similarly in sixth year 95 per cent of LCA students reported having a work experience placement compared with 13 per cent of other students. Students were for the most part very positive about the role of work experience in the LCA programme, and their perceptions are explored in greater detail in Chapter 6.

5.3 Perceived Standards of Schoolwork

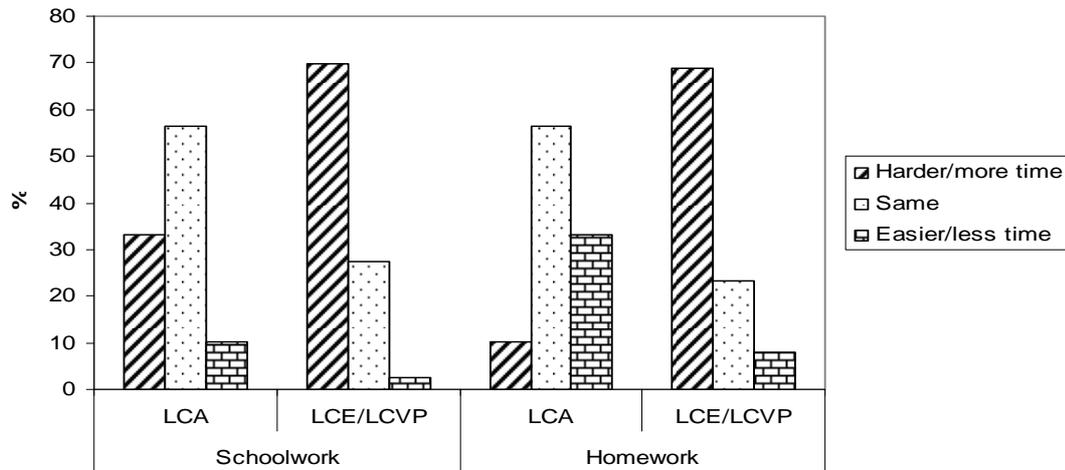
Chapter 4 indicated that most of the students taking LCA had experienced difficulties with their schoolwork over the course of junior cycle. This section explores the perceived ease or difficulty of schoolwork within the LCA programme. Figure 5.4 indicates that the transition from junior to senior cycle is very different for LCA and other LC students. Around half of LCA students find schoolwork easier and spend less time on homework in fifth year than previously. In contrast, four-fifths of LCE/LCVP students find schoolwork more difficult than previously and around half of them are spending more time on homework. LCE and LCVP students experience further increasing demands as they move into sixth year, finding schoolwork more challenging and spending more time than before on homework (Figure 5.5). In contrast, LCA students are more likely to find schoolwork and homework 'about the same' in sixth year as in fifth year. In addition, almost a third of LCA students in sixth year report spending less time on homework than previously.

Figure 5.4: Comparison of Schoolwork and Homework in Fifth Year with Experiences in Junior Certificate Year, as Reported by Students



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

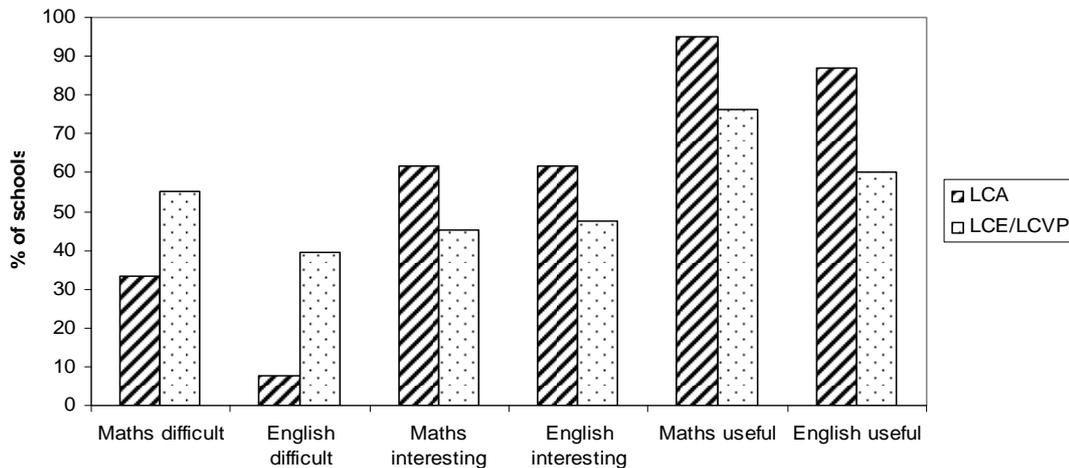
Figure 5.5: Comparison of Schoolwork and Homework in Sixth Year with Experiences in Fifth Year, as Reported by Students



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

For the most part, LCA and LCE/LCVP students take very different subjects. However, it is possible to compare perceptions of English and Maths between the two groups. In both fifth and sixth year, LCA students are less likely to find English and Maths difficult than other students (see Figure 5.6). They are also more likely to find these subjects interesting and useful, perhaps reflecting the different approach taken to these subjects in the LCA programme.

Figure 5.6: Attitudes to English and Maths in Sixth Year



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

The issue of appropriate standards within a curriculum is a complex one. If the coursework is too easy, a student may experience insufficient challenge and consequently underperform relative to their potential. Conversely, if the coursework is too difficult, a student may struggle to keep up with their schoolwork and become disengaged or fatalistic about the prospect of success. It is clear from our findings that students find LCA coursework easier than the junior cycle curriculum. They are also

much less likely than their LCE/LCVP peers to find schoolwork difficult. For example, sixth year LCA students are more likely to agree with the statements that 'I think I am doing well at this school' (94 per cent v. 76 per cent of LCE/LCVP students) and 'I am quite pleased with how my schoolwork is going' (92 per cent v. 62 per cent). They are also less likely to report 'I am having trouble keeping up with my schoolwork' (13 per cent v. 36 per cent in sixth year).

For many young people, the perceived ease of coursework within LCA contributes to feelings of self-efficacy and enhances their engagement with school.

I absolutely hated school [in junior cycle] and it kind of showed me what I wanted to do, ... it changed my whole attitude and everything towards, from being I suppose the worst in the class and then to being the little pet, you know, it completely changed me, I actually enjoyed school. (Barbara, 23, completed LCA, employed)

It wasn't a thing of getting out of the bed in the morning and going 'oh Jesus, I don't want to go to school'. You were actually kind of more or less looking forward to going. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Some respondents spoke with clarity about the impact LCA had on their attitude towards school. Ronan described how he was disengaged from school or in a 'mode' in junior cycle but that changed in LCA:

When you're in school you kind of get into a mode of, you know, you go to school, you learn, you study, that's it, you go home, you're kind of in that mode. But when I done LCA, it kind of brings you into a working mode, it kind of wakes you up a bit. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

The mode of assessment and perceived manageability of schoolwork was found to have consequences for student stress levels (see also Section 5.5). LCA students were significantly less likely to report current stress than other Leaving Certificate students in sixth year; they were less likely to be less able to concentrate, to be losing confidence in themselves, be losing sleep over worry or to feel constantly under strain. This appears to reflect less difficulty in combining homework and study, along with less demanding schoolwork. The scale of such differences is quite marked; 49 per cent of LCE/LCVP students report feeling constantly under strain 'rather more' or 'much more' than usual compared with 11 per cent of LCA students. However, a small number of young people taking LCA, including Ronan, found the project work and overall workload within LCA stressful at times:

It could be stressful as well you know.

And what way would it be stressful?

Well if you get behind on anything, you know, you've a lot of work to catch up on, you do get a lot of work to do in it as well like, they definitely give you a lot of work to do in it. ... Well sometimes it can be overwhelming for some people. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

In contrast, another group of young people criticised the LCA programme for its slow pace of instruction and lack of academic challenge.

Deirdre, for example, became frustrated with the LCA curriculum, believing some of the subjects were too easy. She reporting having no idea that LCA would differ from the established Leaving Certificate so significantly:

I loved English. ... I was raging with LCA ... I didn't understand that when you went into LCA stuff was going to be completely different ... It was too easy, I just had no interest in the lot of it. ... Done it already like, but it's common knowledge, you know, there's a lot of things in LCA that are very ... stupid like, I actually think oh my god, I'm after been put into a special class, that's not a challenge, it's not anything like. ... I went into Maths, the first time we were meant to do Maths, she said to us, it was something so dumb, the teacher, I can't remember ... It was so stupid, I don't know, not one plus one, but along them lines, that you'd know, and I remember thinking, oh my God. ... I'm just raging I didn't go on and do the Leaving Cert. (Deirdre, 22, completed LCA, unemployed)

Not reaching her academic potential, she became disengaged and missed long periods of school in her final year:

Last year, I'm ashamed to even say it now, but I didn't go in a lot, the last year, that was my Leaving Cert year like. ... I got a merit like, and I done really well and all but I'm like I'm not going in to listen to that, that's what I felt and they'd be sitting in there and they'd be talking just about, going on. (Deirdre, 22, completed LCA, unemployed)

Having entered LCA, Jackie realised that the Maths curriculum within the established Leaving Certificate was more suited to her abilities:

They were like third year subjects, they really were. Like they were easy, you know what I mean, it was like third year things. ... The straight Leaving ..., like I felt they were doing subjects to my standard, that I'd be fit to do, but with Applied Leaving it was like god we learnt this in third year, the Maths especially. ... It was like ah my god like are we the slow class. That's how I felt, felt like I was in the stupid class, sort of. (Jackie, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Similarly, having studied and liked German during junior cycle, she felt that LCA French classes were insufficiently challenging:

We had to do French. And like I learnt nothing, honestly nothing, the teachers practically gave us the answers at the end of sixth year for it, you know for the oral. And I was like oh my god I really didn't learn anything. ... Like really you know what I mean ... the subjects were the same as third year ... It just felt like it was back in third year. (Jackie, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Even among students who enjoyed LCA overall, many felt that the Maths curriculum in particular was too easy. Mary and other respondents were surprised at the pace of instruction within LCA and thought the curriculum should have been more challenging. She had struggled with Maths at junior cycle but felt that the level was too easy in LCA:

I found it [Maths] a lot easier with the LCA.

Did you think it was too easy or just right?

It could have been a small bit harder.

For all subjects or just those, just Maths?

Just with the Maths because it was kind of like a small bit babyish, but I think it suited an awful lot of us at the time. ... Because we weren't very good with Maths like, but they did work with it in a good way but I think it could have been stepped up a small bit like. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

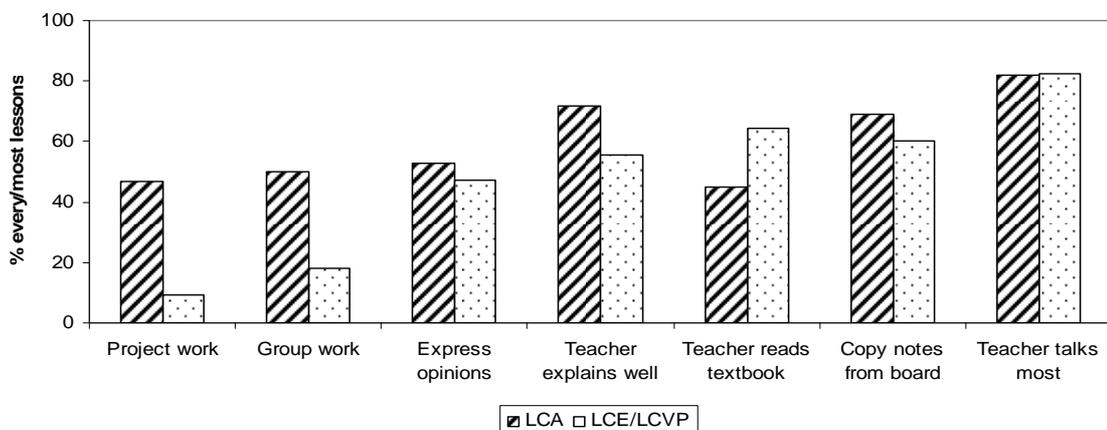
I used to actually argue with one of my teachers over it because she used to constantly want me to use a calculator and I don't, like, unless ... you'd to square something or something like that, I used to never like using calculators I think it's far more beneficial to use the brain like for Maths and stuff. So that was the only thing you know, I thought the Maths was pretty easy. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

This chapter has so far indicated the way in which the content and standards of schoolwork in LCA is quite different from that in the other Leaving Certificate programmes; the extent to which teaching methods are distinctive in nature is explored in the following section.

5.4 Teaching Methods Used

The use of active teaching and learning methodologies is a core principle of the LCA programme. The move towards a learner-oriented pedagogy represents a shift away from the instructional pedagogy previously associated with the Leaving Certificate (Gleeson *et al.*, 2002). Analyses of the approaches used in fifth and sixth year classrooms confirm that such methods are much more commonly used with LCA students than with their counterparts taking LCE or LCVP. Figure 5.7 indicates significant differences in the approaches taken to teaching and learning in fifth year LCA and LCE/LCVP classes. LCE/LCVP classes tend to be characterised by students copying notes from the board and the teacher reading from a textbook. In contrast, LCA classes are characterised by a greater use of group work and project work. LCA classes are also more likely to use ICT

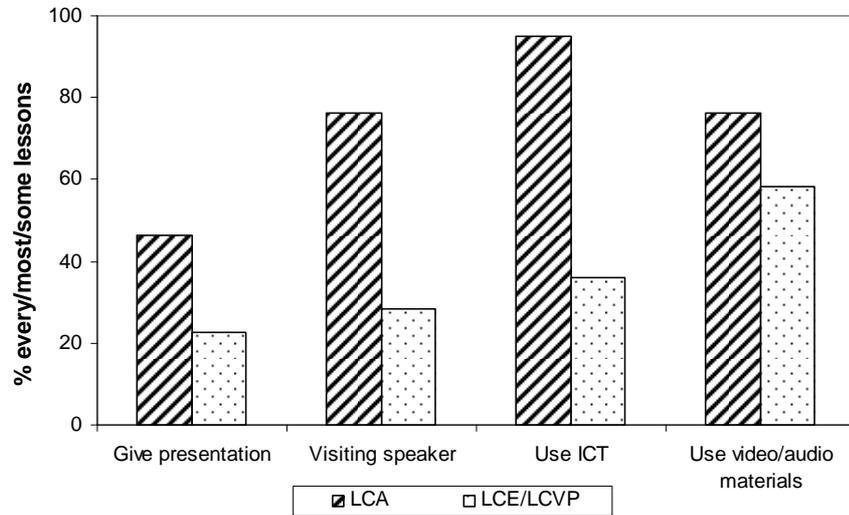
Figure 5.7: Approaches Used in Fifth Year Classes (% 'Every/Most Lessons'), as Reported by Students



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

and video/audio facilities as well as to involve visiting speakers and students themselves giving a presentation to the class (Figure 5.8).

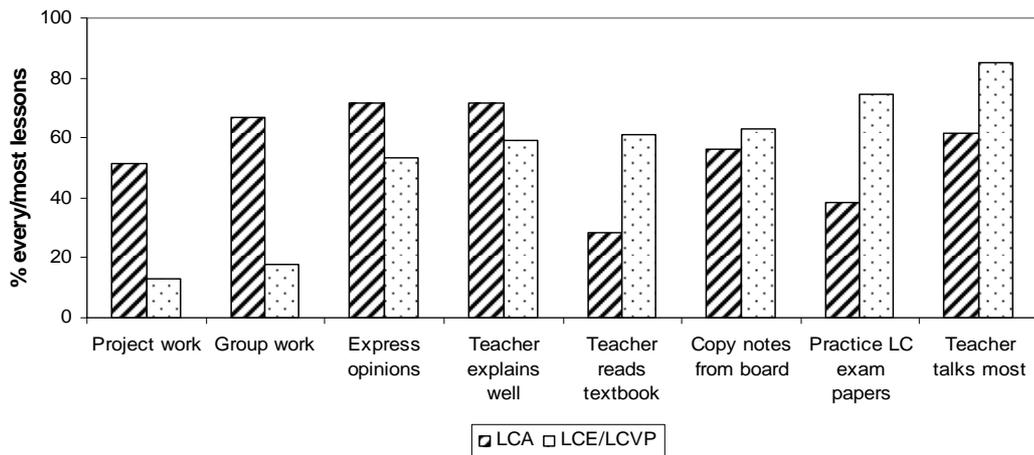
Figure 5.8: Other Approaches Used in Fifth Year Classes (% 'Every/Most/Some Lessons'), as Reported by Students



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

The teaching approaches in sixth year are broadly similar to those found in fifth year classes, with active learning methodologies (such as group work and project work) more evident in LCA classes. However, in some respects, the differences in approach become even more evident, with a larger gap in the use of teacher-centred methods between LCE/LCVP and LCA classes (Figure 5.9).

Figure 5.9: Approaches Used in Leaving Certificate Classes (% 'Every/Most Lessons'), as Reported by Students



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

The majority of respondents felt that the active teaching approaches used in LCA enhanced their overall learning experience and re-engaged them in their schoolwork (see section 5.1). Figure 5.9 indicates that in sixth year, LCA students were more likely to report being able to express their

opinion in class. Respondents felt that they learned more effectively through discussion and debate in the classroom:

I'd say a lot of people are quiet in class because they won't speak up like, you know. You learn a lot more when you do speak up because you're being told there and then like what's, what's right and what's wrong, you seem to take a lot more in like. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

The respondents indicated that class sizes had been much smaller in their LCA group than in their junior cycle classes. There is little systematic data available on average class sizes in LCA. However, analyses of the DES leaver database can be used to indicate the number of young people leaving each school in the final year of LCA. Such analyses indicate that, in 2006, the majority (59 per cent) of schools providing the programme had 10 or fewer students in their LCA year two class.

Many young people felt that the smaller class sizes in LCA meant they received much more individualised attention from the teacher, thus facilitating their learning:

I think it was a smaller class, the teacher gave everybody a lot of help with things and a lot of notes and ... like she kept going over things and practiced everything a lot, that kind of way. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

A smaller class coupled with a greater use of group work was seen as facilitating learning from and with their peers:

Oh it was great ... we were all in one class ... it wasn't what's the answer to this, everything was a group discussion and all ... I just loved it. (Zoe, 22, dropped out of LCA, unemployed)

You were normally working in a group, so if you had something on your mind that you were afraid to do there was always someone in the group that was able to help you. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Although smaller class size and more individual attention were characteristic of LCA, a small number of young people felt that more could be done to provide students with personal attention and support within the class context:

Do you think it [LCA] could be improved in any way?

Do more one on one sessions with people who have social difficulties like bad social skills like, just like anyone who's real nervous because a lot of people who came into the LCA when I started, there were people just joining school, did their Junior Cert somewhere else. (Maurice, 21, completed LCA, student)

I'd do more classes where, one on one, with the teacher like, more one on one with people, students. ... If you had a session once a week or something, just to see how you're overall getting on with that person like. ... So just if there's problems or whatever you could just, you could find out about them. (Anne, 21, completed LCA, employed)

In addition to the use of different teaching approaches within the classroom, LCA graduates reported the variety of activities, such as field trips, which took place outside the school building. The interviews highlighted the effectiveness of fieldtrips in the learning process and developing morale within the class.

It was more visual and getting out there and experiencing it for yourself more, rather than just sitting there and reading it from the book, you more enjoyed it. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

The whole class, like we just got on so well and you know, it was working as part of a team and you know having to do key assignments and tasks and have deadlines and we also went out on like great trips, we went down to Carlow for the adventure centre, we went out on the Dublin bus tour. (Niamh, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Some schools were more active than others but these activities allowed students to become more involved in their community and improve their self-confidence:

I loved going out like ..., you had to go to different places and do things, make the phone calls, it just gets you more socially involved I think, you know, outside of school like. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

It was good to get out of school as well like, you're not always in the school, you were always off, they brought us to, you know, Drink Aware, like AA meetings and all, to see what goes on, you know. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

In sum, LCA classes tend to be characterised by more active teaching and learning methodologies. These approaches were generally seen as enhancing learning, a process which was further reinforced by smaller class size and more individual attention from teachers. Group work was seen as an effective way to promote learning from and with peers. Many LCA students were also given the opportunity to engage in activities outside the classroom, such as field trips which were popular with the young people interviewed.

5.5 Approach to Assessment

The LCA and LCE/LCVP programmes differ markedly in their approach to assessment. Performance in LCA is assessed over the two years of the programme and is based on the completion of modules, the performance of tasks and performance in terminal examinations. In contrast, LCE and LCVP assessment is much more reliant on terminal examinations. For the majority of respondents, one of the most positive aspects of LCA was the system of modular credit accumulation. The interviews highlighted the change in attitudes to learning and assessment among many of the respondents during the course of the programme. Many respondents were attracted to LCA by its structure of credit accumulation and found over the two year period that their grades, attendance and overall interest in school improved under the new system. Of particular note was the reference to a 'less stressful' school environment as they built up credits throughout the year through the completion of project work and modules rather than relying on their performance in a terminal examination:

So how did the school work compare then to the Junior Cert year?

It was definitely more relaxed, you know, I found the Junior Cert just, it's very pressure, especially near the end of the year because the fact that, before you know it the exams are there, you know, and you have to really study for them, but in LCA you're actually doing projects through the whole year you know, so you actually know what your grades are going to be which is good. ... Like you know how many credits you need at the end you only need to get in order to pass it. If you do the work during the year, then you're fine. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

I remember you'd know what results you had and you'd know what you needed to receive so I did find it an awful lot better because you were so much more relaxed, you weren't like stressed, pulling your hair. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

The transparency of deadlines for projects was seen as a positive aspect of the programme, and the nature of the workload was seen as providing a better preparation for the future:

Every different module you had to be accredited for it like and so you could gain like six credits for something and then at the end of the year they were all totted up, which was good. Because it wasn't ... like the Leaving Cert, you just go through the whole year, then you do your big exam at the end like. And even now having gone to college ... it was the same way ... you did your assignments. (Fiona, 25, completed LCA, employed)

However, some students did find the oral assessment of their student tasks by external examiners quite stressful:

We were all nervous, you know, because they're coming in like and they're looking through your project and then you're trying to tell them everything, you know ... they'd be asking you questions and all like, probably just to see ... if you did it. (Rebecca, 21, dropped out of LCA, home duties)

During LCA, students received credits for attendance. As a result, many respondents found their attendance improved during this time:

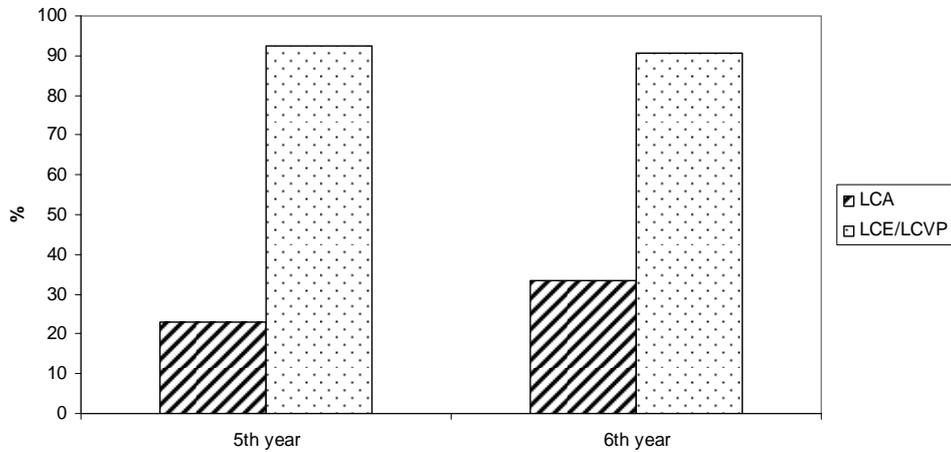
That's another thing about LCA, you got points, you got points for timekeeping and attendance so if you were late or missed days you were deducted points. I had a great timekeeping and attendance record so it was good in a way like, where in first, second and third year you didn't really mind missing days really, but in LCA it was important so you never really did. (Niamh, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Differences between LCA and other Leaving Certificate students in actual attendance levels are discussed below in Section 5.5.

Very marked differences are evident between LCA and other Leaving Certificate students in the use of homework as a tool for learning and assessment. Figure 5.10 indicates the extent to which fifth and sixth year students report receiving homework in 'every' or 'most' lessons. It is

evident that only a minority of LCA students report receiving homework on a regular basis.

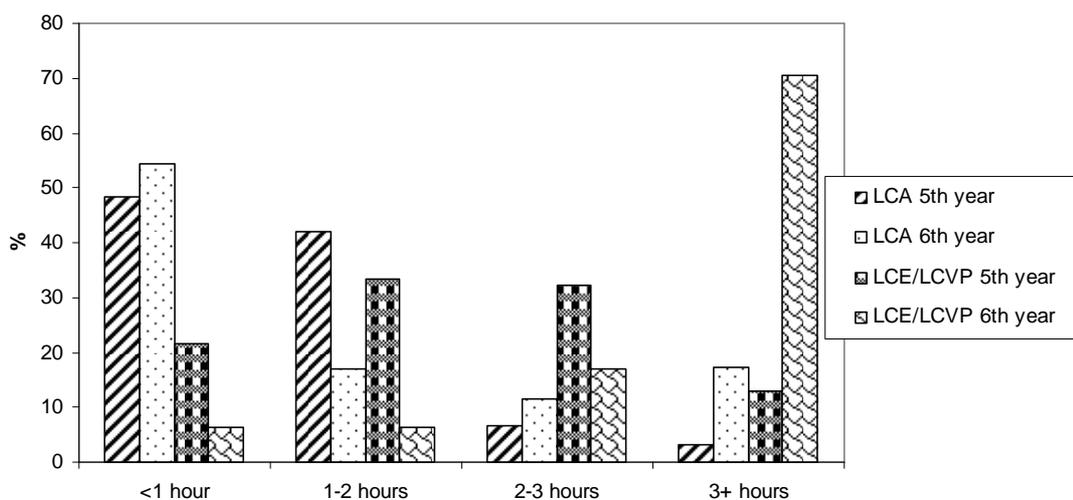
Figure 5.10: Use of Homework in Fifth and Sixth Year Classes ('Every/Most Lessons'), as Reported by Students



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

The greater reliance of LCE/LCVP classes on homework is also evident from reports of the amount of time students spend on homework and study outside school (Figure 5.11). In both fifth and sixth year, the LCE/LCVP group spends considerably more time on homework and study than the LCA group. The differences are even more dramatic in sixth year; the majority of other LC students spend more than 3 hours per night on study compared with one in six LCA students. As a result, almost all (92 per cent) LCA students find it 'very' or 'fairly easy' to combine homework and study in sixth year compared with less than a quarter of other LC students.

Figure 5.11: Amount of Time Spent on Homework/Study in Fifth and Sixth Year, as Reported by Students



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

The differences in mode of assessment between LCA and the other Leaving Certificate programmes are found to have consequences for

practising for exams both within and outside of school. Three-quarters of LCE/LCVP students report practising previous exam papers in ‘every’ or ‘most’ lessons compared with fewer than four in ten LCA students. Furthermore, among fifth years, LCA students are much less likely to take private tuition (‘grinds’) than their LCE/LCVP counterparts (5 per cent v. 16 per cent). The difference between the two groups becomes much more marked in sixth year, when almost half of LCE/LCVP students, and only 5 per cent of LCA students, are taking grinds mid-way through the school year.

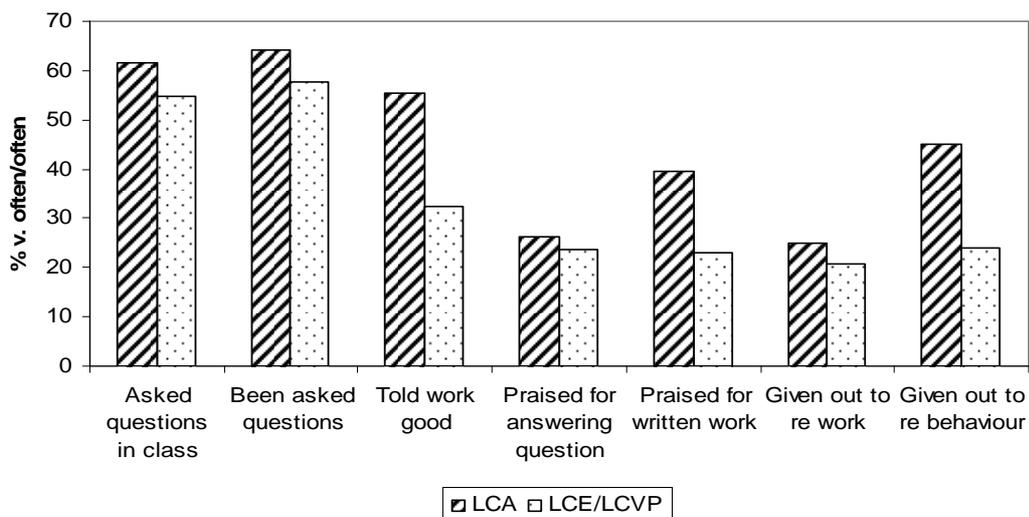
In sum, the different modes of assessment are found to have consequences for student engagement and approach to learning. For LCE and LCVP students, there is a fairly strong focus on the importance of homework and study as part of student learning. For LCA students, in contrast, learning is more strongly related to activities within the classroom, workplace or on field trips.

The experiences of young people taking LCA are shaped not only by the curriculum and teaching methods used but by day-to-day interaction with teachers and other students. The extent to which social relations change and develop over senior cycle is considered in the following sections.

5.6 Social Relations With Teachers

The longitudinal study of post-primary students allows us to compare the nature of teacher-student interaction in LCA and LCE/LCVP classes. Such interaction can be characterised as positive, involving praise and feedback, or negative, involving frequent reprimands or criticism. LCA classes in both fifth and sixth year appear to entail more positive *and* negative interactions between teachers and students (Figure 5.12 and 5.13), which most likely reflects the generally small size of LCA class groups. LCA students more frequently report being praised for their written work but also more frequently report being given out to by teachers for their work

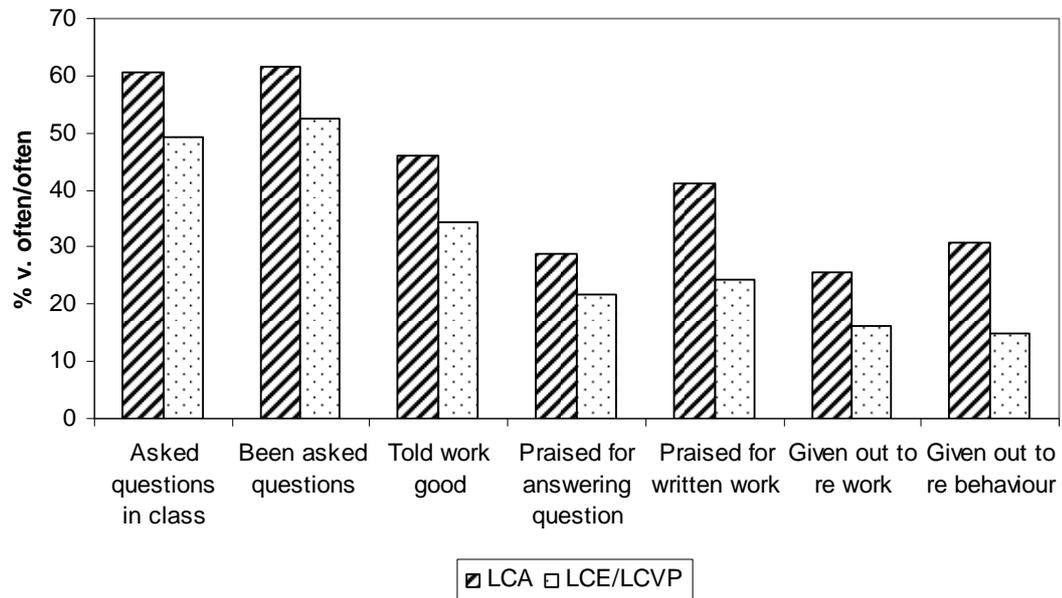
Figure 5.12: Nature of Teacher-student Interaction in Fifth Year, as Reported by Students



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

and for their behaviour. Other types of positive interaction appear somewhat more common among LCA students but the differences between the two groups are not significant.

Figure 5.13: Nature of Teacher-student Interaction in Sixth Year, as Reported by Students



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

In keeping with other Leaving Certificate students (see Smyth *et al.*, forthcoming), LCA students reported a shift in attitudes among teachers towards expecting students to take more responsibility for their own learning. Some students were somewhat surprised at this new approach:

Like they weren't forcing stuff down your neck to learn you know ... it changed big time. There's actually one thing that kind of shocked me, it's like, if you don't do the work, it's not our problem, you know, you have to do it, so they made you kind of pick yourself up and do the work because if you didn't then it was your problem. But in first to third year ... they were on your back the whole time to do this and to do that, you had to because they were telling you to do it. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

In general, LCA students were slightly more likely than other students to report liking most of their teachers (87 per cent v. 82 per cent in sixth year). LCA students are more likely to report that 'teachers would help me if I had a problem with my schoolwork' (95 per cent v. 87 per cent in fifth year) and are less likely 'not to tell the teacher if I don't understand' (15 per cent v. 21 per cent in sixth year; 23 per cent v. 27 per cent in fifth year). Furthermore, LCA students are more likely than other students to report always trying to answer questions in class (77 per cent v. 58 per cent). Sarah reported that the smaller class size and the encouragement received meant that she was much more likely to actively contribute in class than she had in junior cycle:

When there's a bigger class there and there's a lot of kind of pressure I suppose and you know all the students and things, I'd never speak up in case I was kind

of wrong or something and then you know they'd laugh and just forget about it. So I used to sit there and wait for everyone else to answer before I would. But then when you went into LCA the classes shortened a lot ... I would have spoken up a lot more like. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Respect emerged as a major factor in the new relationship between teachers and students in LCA. Respondents felt that instead of being looked upon negatively as was the case in junior cycle, there was mutual respect between teachers and students in LCA classes:

I thought they were more like close with us and you know, more open and real down to earth like, it was weird like, it was just great. (Niamh, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Most respondents felt that this new respect had a positive impact on their work, with positive teacher-student interaction facilitating their engagement and learning:

Like the teachers in LCA had a bit of banter with us, they understood us a bit more. ... If you had respect for them, you'd do the work for them, you know, if you didn't, there was always going to be problems, you know what I mean. That's the biggest thing, they earned your respect. A lot of the lads got on great with them, you wouldn't want to let them down like. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

They [teachers] seemed a lot sounder when I went to LCA. ... I suppose it was a smaller group and I suppose we were working better like, we were working better as well like. (Derek, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Barbara found that teachers had more time for students and helped them with their work:

Did you notice the change in the approach of the teachers towards you, the student?

Yeah, you actually got a better bond, I think, with the teachers, I don't know, kind of, they started to respect you, I don't know, I suppose you're just spending a lot more time with them but I found that they did help you an awful lot more in stuff and explained stuff an awful lot better. (Barbara, 23, completed LCA, employed)

Other respondents noted that they were given much more say in class content and their opinions were valued:

They treat you with respect, I don't know, the way they treat you, it's always calm it's always nice. ... Before you were told what to do but yeah, they ask your opinions a lot and then, yeah, or what you think of what you should be doing and stuff, your ideas like as well. (Annette, 21, completed LCA, employed)

You came out of third year and the respect you got from the teachers ... you weren't treated as a child, you were treated as an adult and they didn't make the choices for you, you made the choices together. You were always given an option

and your opinion was always heard. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

In contrast to the majority of respondents who felt their relationship with teachers improved, some young people highlighted more negative relations with teachers and reported a lack of interest among some teachers. Linda stated that in fifth year her class did very little work and she recalled how as a group they realised they had not covered enough of the curriculum to pass LCA:

In fifth year now, it was kind of the year that we didn't learn much and then sixth year it was all thrown on us. Everything was thrown on us that we felt we had to learn and we kind of started stressing then thinking that, this isn't good enough, we should have learned all this last year, you know, but we didn't do anything about it like. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

She felt that some of the teachers did not give the class their full attention, leaving the class for long periods and allowing the students to do as they wished:

Like two or three of them weren't at all, I don't think had any interest, our Religion teacher, he'd talk about football with the boys like. ... Yeah, there was one teacher, the IT teacher, very lackadaisical you know, you could literally do anything on the internet, go on the computer, go on the internet and do anything, about ten minutes like, we'd have stuff to do and that and then that'd be it really and then all the, most of the rest of the teachers are really good like, trying their best. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

In keeping with the lack of challenge in LCA schoolwork reported by some young people, some felt that LCA teachers should be more motivated and give students greater encouragement. Shirley, for example, felt that the teachers needed to 'push' the students more:

Was there anything you would change about the LCA?

Just to have the teachers that are going to push you and get your work done and help you through it like, than having teachers that are just sitting there just saying ah yeah, do it if you want, you know, you need, definitely need a push, and again, you don't need teachers that are going to be too strict to turn you off it either. (Sandra, 23, completed LCA, home duties)

Rebecca also felt that teachers needed to be more attentive and examine students work to make sure it was done correctly:

Just a bit more pushing to get you like, to do all your stuff, trying, getting [you] to go over your stuff to make sure it's perfect like, yeah you'll get a good mark on it or whatever, I don't think they went over any of our stuff. (Rebecca, 21, dropped out of LCA, home duties)

Jackie felt that the relationship with her teachers worsened in LCA as they treated her like a child:

I felt I was being treated like I was in second year, I honestly did, like a little child....Because I knew people from school as well that did the straight Leaving

and ... when I'd see the teachers speaking to them in the hallway they looked like they were having like respect for each other. (Jackie, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Despite having a great relationship with her LCA teachers, Barbara noticed that the teachers who were not involved in LCA would continue to treat her as they had done in junior cycle.

I found that the teachers that weren't involved in the LCA, they were always picking on you in the corridors, stupid little things. (Barbara, 23, completed LCA, employed)

Comparing LCA and LCE/LCVP students using data from the longitudinal study, students taking LCA tend to have significantly higher rates of misbehaviour than other students, especially in relation to being late for school, getting into trouble for not following the school rules and truanting. They were also more likely to receive detention and to have been suspended during the current school year (46 per cent v. 7 per cent in sixth year). It is important, however, to note that LCA students had higher rates of misbehaviour at the end of third year so these differences do not reflect the influence of LCA. In fact, many young people indicated the way in which more active teaching methods and improved relations with teachers meant that discipline was much less of an issue than had been the case in junior cycle:

We had the same teachers but they treated us a lot differently

So how do you think?

Treated us a lot better, they were, you know, a lot more lenient and a lot nicer.

(Tim, 21, completed LCA, unemployed)

LCA students received credits for attendance which many suggested improved their attendance at school and timekeeping after they left school. Greater engagement with lessons was also seen as contributing to students looking forward to coming to school, rather than actively avoiding it (see above). Niamh's attendance record improved when she went into LCA:

That's another thing about LCA, you got points, you got points for timekeeping and attendance so if you were late or missed days you were deducted points ... In LCA like, you know, I had a great timekeeping and attendance record so, it was good in a way like, where in first, second and third year you didn't really mind missing days really, but in LCA it was important so you never really did. (Niamh, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Sarah felt that during LCA everybody enjoyed going into school which improved their attendance levels:

Everyone loved going to school, I'd say, like I never I'd say missed maybe six days in the two years I'd say and ... you like want to go to school, you don't mind going to school like, you're there and you're having a laugh as well as doing anything else like. And yeah, I think everyone was pretty much the same in my class anyway. ... There was nobody going oh, I hate school, you know what I mean. ... You're more aware of what that can actually do to you in like the long term and I'd say since, since then, since I've started working like, I don't think

I've ever missed a day like working, unless I'm really sick where before in school I'd take off a day you know, I'd try and get a day off, I've a pain in my head, but since then, no, I don't think there's any point in it, that I suppose is good, you know. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

In a number of cases, however, LCA graduates reported a lack of discipline within class, with a disruption to learning time. Sandra felt the teachers in her school were not able to control the 'messaging' in her LCA class:

There was a lot in it that wanted to get work done but you couldn't get it done. Say like I was saying before like you want to get it done but you can't get it done because people kept messing and things like that and you'd be getting, say you'd be falling out with them over it because like you're losing out because of them messing like. And when you say it to someone, like say if you say it to the teacher, you tell them to stop like, they say ah will you just be quiet and do your work ... Some teachers were really quiet, they just say now, Shh, Shh, but like, no one's going to listen to someone at the top of the class saying shush, shush. ... There'd be times you'd feel like oh I'm going to scream like, you know the way you don't want to go ahead with it but you just do because you know some of them aren't going to listen to you. (Sandra, 23, completed LCA, home duties)

Linda felt that much of the teachers' time was spent disciplining and removing people from her LCA class:

For the teacher it would have been more hard because they'd have to deal with a lot of people getting kicked out in one day, you know, for to get other people to learn like. It was kind of that hardness for the teacher, like the teachers I have to say, some of them were really good and really, really tried. ... Yeab, no one else could learn like, so what could you do? (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

The following section develops on this issue of interaction with classmates within the LCA class.

5.7 Social Relations with Peers

Smaller class sizes and the emphasis on working as a group within class were seen as enhancing social relations among students:

You kind of got closer to more people, because you didn't have to sit in the class and actually just listen to somebody talking all day, you know. You got to integrate with people and you kind of made more friends through that. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

There was such a small class that everyone got on. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Reported levels of bullying are similar for LCA and other LC students in both fifth and sixth year.

Some respondents reported social mixing between the LCA and other LC class groups. Andrew felt that his LCA class was treated the same as the

other Leaving Certificate classes as they were mixed together for assemblies and sport events:

We were with them going up. ... You'd be going on the same breaks as them still, no, live near most them anyway so, there was always, still hang around with them, you know, so ... sure everyone would be still the same. Yeah, there was never any divide or anything like that, no, no never. Sure a sports day and stuff like that or awards ceremonies in the hall, the school hall, you'd be all the same so. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

I still hung around, because my best friend was in normal Leaving Cert so we still hung around every lunchtime, every break time, we met up like. (Annette, 21, completed LCA, employed)

However, a significant issue that emerged from the interviews with young people was the negative labelling of LCA students by other Leaving Certificate students in some schools. Some of the respondents recalled being called names by their peers in the LCE class. Respondents differed, however, in the extent to which they regarded such remarks as 'harmless', either laughing them off or taking them more seriously:

You'd always have ... other students in the school slagging you about the LCA, because ... it's a bit easier than the normal Leaving Cert, you know, you probably have Lowest Class Applied and you know, stuff like that, you know, just people making jokes like that but sure they wouldn't probably mean any harm, just everyone having a bit of a laugh, you know. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

What was the thing, Lowest Common Arseholes was what it was, LCA, yeah, but you took no notice whatsoever. Some people have a dim view because ... you can see people are under severe pressure ... and you know we weren't under pressure, we were doing it over the two years. ... Most people had an okay view about it like, you know, but there would have been some alright that were just like, you know, god you've no brain inside your head kind of thing like. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

It was just slagging your spelling ... Another thing which I thought was terrible like a lot of them called it the handicapped Leaving, which really annoyed me. ... It really annoyed me, I thought that was awful. (Barbara, 23, completed LCA, employed)

Interestingly, some of the respondents referred to the LCE as the 'normal', 'real' or 'straight' Leaving Certificate which may suggest they also have negative perceptions of the LCA.

Some young people reported that their class was labelled as the 'dumb' or 'thick' class. Even where pejorative terms were not employed, many felt that the other Leaving Certificate groups did not understand the nature and purpose of the LCA programme:

She was like saying oh the LCA is a doss year ... but I stood up for myself, I stood up I said that's the way I'm going to college, I'm confident, I'll be able to go

into school, feel relaxed and be able to do it that way. (Siobhan, 25, completed LCA, employed)

Ones that are posher than you or whatever, who had more confidence or whatever and they said, used to say to us like, oh it's the easy way out, it's not the real thing. ... A doss year and that's all you do. But it wasn't like, I know it was a lot different like, but they didn't seem to understand. (Deirdre, 22, completed LCA, unemployed)

The separation into different Leaving Certificate programmes was seen by some young people as resulting in a lack of social interaction between LCA students and their peers. This reinforced the perception of the LCA group as different, with some students internalising the negative labels. Sandra, for example, reported that she only socialised with people in the LCA classes:

If you were mixing with anyone you were only going to be mixing with the LCA2, you weren't mixing with anyone else in the group, like say other years like or anything like that. ... You'd feel kind of, as if we were the two stupid groups like and there was people saying it like as well, so you'd be thinking that must be the way. (Sandra, 23, completed LCA, home duties)

Similarly, Linda had no contact with friends she had had in junior cycle and felt there was a gap between her class and the other Leaving Certificate classes:

When we went into fifth year there was ... like just a total gap then. ... At lunch time you'd see them and that and just the fact that, I don't know, we were in one group and then there was like the outside world. We didn't actually have any contact with girls that we knew when we were in third year and that. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

In some schools, this social separation was mirrored and further reinforced by the provision of separate facilities for LCA students:

We never had much to do with the normal Leaving Cert. ... We had our own sports events and things like that. (Tim, 21, completed LCA, unemployed)

Well say there'd be plays and that but they'd be all seated, put out like and they'd say now, they'd say LCA here, fifth year here, sixth year there, you'd always stay kept separate like. (Sandra, 23, completed LCA, home duties)

All the Leaving Certs would be brought up [at assemblies], we wouldn't be asked. And I remember loads of times it happened and we had to go up and make complaints to the principal about this. (Deirdre, 22, completed LCA, unemployed)

Deirdre also felt that in her school, the LCA classes were given poorer facilities, including smaller rooms and lockers:

We had a gammy little room down there, and our lockers, I think we'd only half lockers, where the other Leaving Certs, we won't go into their locker room, big spacious thing, all their lockers and loads of benches and all, and we were

crammed into this dingy old part of the building. (Deirdre, 22, completed LCA, unemployed)

Similarly, Elizabeth reported a physical separation between the LCA and other Leaving Certificate classes, with the LCA group placed alongside junior cycle classes:

You were put in a different side of the school ... but basically you actually have no interaction with all the other Leaving Certs, you didn't get along and then, because of that, that stereotypical thing of like, what you were in LCA, people didn't really like associate with you. ... And after finishing school girls kind of told you, well, we know that we didn't speak to you when we were in school. ... Yeah, it's like we're up near first years and second years and they're down near fifth years and sixth years. (Elizabeth, 25, completed LCA, employed)

The labelling of LCA by their peers raised a broader issue about perceptions of the programme, in particular, the lack of awareness of the programme among family, friends and society generally. Many respondents suggested that people were unaware of the purpose and content of LCA which resulted in negative perceptions of the programme. Sarah would like to see a greater understanding of the role of LCA in improving young people's attitudes to school and increasing rates of retention:

Is there anything you would change about the programme?

I'd probably ... get it known more outside of school than anything. I think every school should have it by right. ... This way ... they can be brought step by step through it like and they still get a Leaving Cert out of it. Whereas otherwise you see people dropping out at sixteen, seventeen, because the pressure gets too much. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Fiona felt frustrated at the negative status of LCA in her school and more widely, feeling she had to hide the fact that she took the course from employers and friends. Like Sarah, she argued for greater awareness of the opportunities open to LCA graduates:

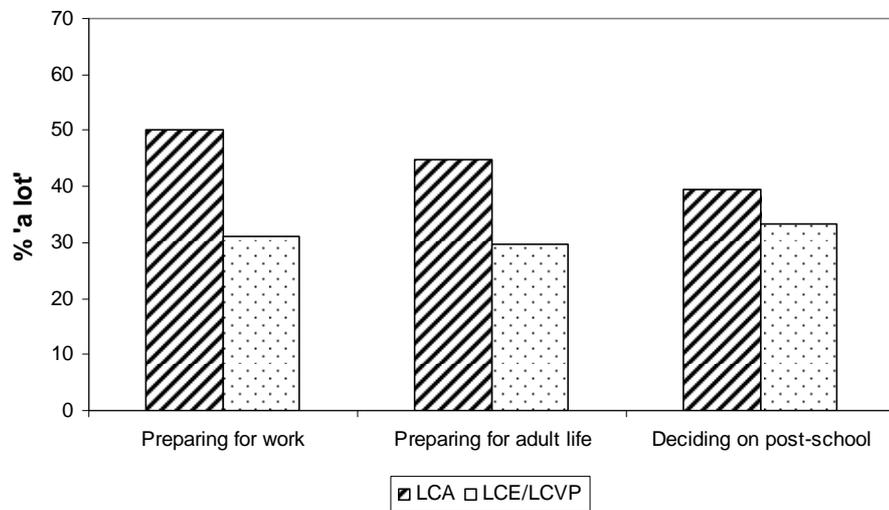
I think it was the whole thing of things people say, like you'll only get kind of PLC courses. ... People should know that you can actually go further than just getting a PLC course and getting FETAC level 5 and working childcare facilities ... you know, people can do whatever. (Fiona, 25, completed LCA, employed)

In sum, smaller class size and learning approaches facilitated the development of a tighter bond among LCA students. However, many young people reported a lack of social interaction with other Leaving Certificate students and, in some cases, negative labelling of their class as 'thick' or 'slow'. This labelling was seen as reflecting a lack of awareness among their peers, society and the media of the potential benefits of the LCA programme.

**5.8
Skill
Development**

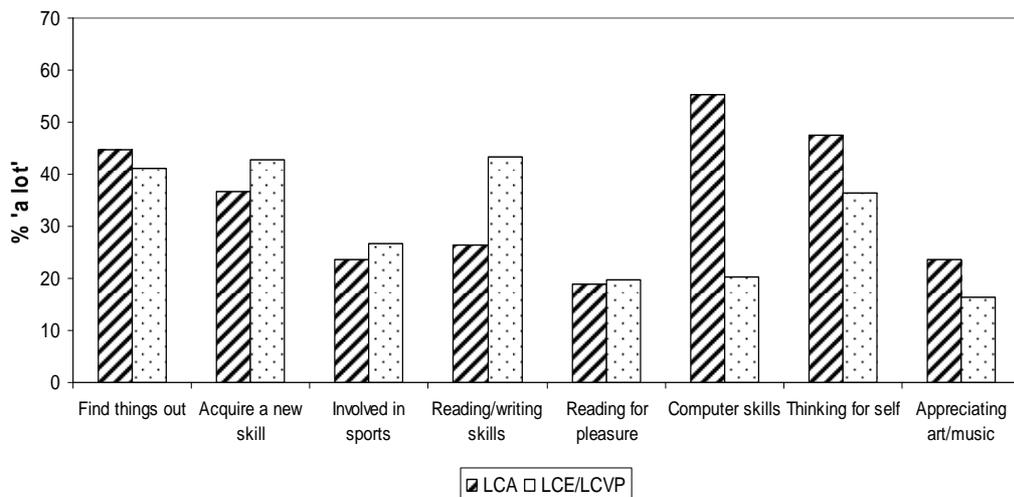
This section draws on the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study and on the in-depth interviews to explore the skills young people felt they had developed in the course of taking LCA. Sixth year students were asked to reflect on the extent to which their second-level education had benefited them across a range of dimensions (Figures 5.14 and 5.15). LCA students were much more likely to report that their schooling had been a ‘lot’ of benefit in terms of life after school, particularly in relation to preparation for work and for adult life (Figure 5.14). In relation to other skills and competencies, they were broadly similar to LCE/LCVP students. However, they were much more likely than their peers to report their schooling had been of benefit in the development of ICT skills (Figure 5.15). However, LCA students were more negative about the extent to which school had benefited their reading and writing skills.

Figure 5.14: Perceived Benefits of Schooling in Relation to Life After School



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study- (PPLS) database.

Figure 5.15: Perceived Benefits of Schooling in Relation to Skills and Competencies



Source: Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) database.

The responses from LCA graduates were broadly similar to those of sixth year students. They emphasised the importance of LCA for two aspects in particular – the development of the social skills necessary for working life, and preparation for adult life.

5.8.1 SOCIAL SKILLS AND PREPARATION FOR THE WORKPLACE

Respondents felt that the increased confidence and ability to communicate effectively acquired during LCA had helped them make the transition to the labour market. Mary and Alice understood the importance of these skills for meeting new people and impressing prospective employers at the interview stage:

What skills do you feel you got from the LCA?

I definitely got people skills anyway, time keeping for going to school, that you get into a routine, a lot of others ...

Ok and have you found these skills useful since you've left school?

Yeah, ... you kind of stand up in front of your class and you're talking, so you've that bit of confidence to be able to get up and talk in front of other people and they give you direction, like keeping eye contact when you're talking to someone and handshakes now and all that stuff now like, which is interesting. Because a lot of us wouldn't have known that going into an interview and maybe dressing smartly because a lot of us were into wearing our tracksuits now and they were saying like when you are going to an interview you can't just go in like that like, you have to present yourself. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

We learned loads about interviews, it was all interviews, interviews, interviews, I used to never be nervous going for interviews, you know what to wear and you know what to say I suppose. (Alice, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Some respondents were reflective about how LCA taught them to take the initiative in finding a job and be more independent. Ronan felt he had an advantage over his friends who did not take LCA and were not prepared for gaining access to the workplace:

Just even to look for work, you know, you're not going to get anything waiting for somebody to call you, you have to look for it ... and even not to be afraid to even try to talk to someone. Just like when I done LCA, we done all sorts of stuff like projects and how to work with different people, team-building exercises, you know, it kind of prepared us for work. And you know, from listening to some of my friends that didn't do LCA, like they're still finding it hard to actually find work, you know, because a lot of them are failing interviews and stuff like that, they have the knowledge but ... (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

Niamh described how she learned how to be independent which gave her the confidence to try different jobs and decide on a career direction:

I found doing the LCA as well like, it really helps you become like very independent like you know, very independent like.

In what way?

Well, like I mean, going out to work and that, you know, I went to like a solicitor's office, an accountant's office ... laboratories ... and it was just great right, the experience and skills that it gave me and you know, it just really helped me in life, helped me decide as well like where I wanted to go. (Niamh, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Others recognised how communication skills acquired in LCA enabled them to participate more effectively in the workplace. Sarah explained how LCA allowed her to take responsibility for her timekeeping and attendance at work:

You're more aware of what you're doing, you know, if you're missing days and stuff, you're more aware of what that can actually do to you in like the long term. ... Since I've started working like, I don't think I've ever missed a day like working, unless I'm really sick where before in school I'd take off a day you know, I'd try and get a day off, I've a pain in my head, but since then, no, I don't think there's any point in it, that I suppose is good, you know. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Jack felt that the LCA gave him the communication and administrative tools to function effectively at work:

As far as I was concerned I learned a lot more in that year say then I did in half a year in normal school but you were learning about different things ... It wasn't all Maths and all about this and that, you learn a lot about vocabulary and how to talk to people and how to write letters and things, things ... actually that I still use today like, really make a difference in the working world. ... I was well able to speak for myself but they helped you kind of word things properly and be able to speak to someone about things, I don't know whether that works, you'll be able to tell me at the end but I find it does anyway and it gets me through life, so, yeah maybe it helped in them ways. (Jack, 23, dropped out of LCA, employed)

Barbara thinks that she is more professional in her job because of the organisational skills she acquired through LCA:

I always say the LCA kind of showed me where to go, you know, and helped me be very particular in everything that I do, be professional in my job. Just simple little things, you know, even with sample boards [in interior design] and stuff, even if it's not cut straight, or you know presenting stuff like, it has to be ... squeaky clean, presentation in stuff, I have to say and I got a lot of that from the LCA in the project work and, you know, it made me very organised and particular. (Barbara, 23, completed LCA, employed)

5.8.2 PREPARATION FOR ADULT LIFE

In addition to benefits in the workplace, the interviews showed how the LCA prepared respondents for adult life. The majority of respondents attributed their growth in confidence to the alternative teaching approaches used in LCA (see Chapter 5), in particular, the opportunity to speak up and voice opinions in class. Anne, Siobhan and Sarah felt they had gained confidence during LCA and believed they had benefited from this, not only in the workplace but in their day-to-day lives:

Confidence is the main thing I came out with ... because like I barely, well not barely talked, but I was very iffy and now you can't stop me talking, you can't, I get told to shut up now, to be quiet.

Can you see then the way that confidence has helped you since you left school?

Yeah, big time ... overall you don't mind talking to people ... even strangers you have no problem with, first people I meet like, my sister's friends, you can just fire away and you're talking away to them like. (Anne, 21, completed LCA, employed)

I built up more courage. ... Before I didn't like asking for things but now I have built up confidence ... I'm more confident now. (Siobhan, 25, completed LCA, employed)

What would you say are the skills that you got from the LCA programme?

People skills, communication skills, everything, I actually learned like, quite a lot like besides ... before I wouldn't exactly go up talking to people about nothing like, I wouldn't go up and just say, but now I would, I wouldn't have any problem or anything, any issues or anything like that. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Sarah believed that if she had taken the LCE she would not have developed an interest in travel and a 'get up and go' attitude to life:

Have you found those [LCA] skills useful since you've left school?

Oh yeah, definitely, ... [I] probably wouldn't be halfway to where I am now if I didn't. I'm big into travelling as well like, I'm mad for travelling at the moment. ... If I had done the ordinary Leaving Cert and just stayed sitting quietly in the class, I don't think I'd have any get up and go for that like. I think that the fact that I could talk, I'd talk to a stranger asking, even the time, before that it would have been a big issue for me, but now, I wouldn't have any problem with it whatsoever like, so, it sort of just brought me out of myself really. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Personal development is a major objective of the LCA programme and this section has highlighted how respondents feel the programme has benefited them in the workplace and in learning to participate fully in society. At the same time, there was a feeling among respondents that the LCA programme is 'not for everyone'. Respondents were asked whether they would encourage others to take LCA; many said they would but felt that it depended upon the type of student. In keeping with the findings of Matthews's (2006) study, young people reported that the programme was more suitable for those who had difficulties with schoolwork in junior cycle and/or who were at risk of early school leaving:

Would you advise other students to do it?

Yeah, I definitely would if they were like in the same situation I was, not too good with books or that, I definitely would. (Maura, 24, completed LCA, employed)

Would you recommend it to anyone?

Oh yeah, I would yeah, anyone that's leaving school, I'd recommend to do it like. ... Especially if you leave school at sixteen years of age, I know two people now who did that and they're just destroyed. (Graham, 22, completed LCA, apprentice)

In contrast, some respondents felt that students should take the LCE if at all possible:

I suppose if they're very, very brainy, they might as well do the Leaving Cert, if you don't mind studying and you don't mind being in all the time studying and loads of homework, do it. (Alice, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Mary pointed out that the LCA may be insufficiently challenging for some students:

Maybe for the more intellectual types, it mightn't be their cup of tea because it mightn't challenge them an awful lot. But for people who are finding it tough, maybe it would be an easier option for them because it is more graspable. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

The suitability of the programme was also seen as reflecting longer term occupational aspirations among potential participants:

It depends on who you are, I think. I think it really depends on your personality and ... how headstrong you are ... what you really want out of life. ... You're not going to be an architect out of LCA, you know that kind of way like, so I think it depends on what you really want. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

In sum, LCA graduates viewed their education as beneficial, especially in preparing them for working and adult life. However, they indicated that the programme was not suitable for everyone, being especially appropriate for those struggling with schoolwork and at risk of early school leaving.

5.9 Conclusions

This chapter has drawn on a longitudinal study of post-primary students and in-depth interviews with young LCA graduates to document learning experiences among programme participants. Young people are generally positive about the content of the programme and the teaching methods used. Access to more vocationally oriented subjects was a motivation for many in taking the programme and the practical focus of the subjects and modules was seen as enhancing learning. However, some young people criticised the fact that they did not have access to certain subject areas and there appeared to be a degree of gender differentiation in the provision and take-up of vocational specialism courses.

In keeping with the underlying principles of the LCA programme, LCA classes were characterised by an emphasis on more active teaching and learning methodologies, especially group work and project work. Furthermore, smaller class sizes meant that many reported more individual attention and support from their teachers. The approach within LCA meant that many young people re-engaged with learning and had improved attitudes to school. Modular credit accumulation was seen as a particularly

positive aspect of the programme, giving young people greater feedback on their progress and reducing the stress associated with a terminal exam.

A more general issue regarding the standards of schoolwork within LCA is apparent. For some students, finding schoolwork easier than before resulted in improved self-confidence and engagement with learning. However, others felt insufficiently challenged by the coursework and expressed surprise at the gap in standards between the LCA and other Leaving Certificate programmes. Maths, in particular, attracted comment, with some respondents characterising it as 'babyish' and overly repetitive of junior cycle material.

Many young people reported improved relations with their teachers over the course of the LCA programme. Similarly, having a smaller class and spending more time on group work improved relations with their peers within the classroom. However, there was evidence of some segregation in interaction between the LCA and other class groups. In some cases, the division into distinct classes for LCA and LCE/LCVP was mirrored and reinforced by a physical separation in terms of facilities, assemblies and other school events. Many young people reported a lack of awareness of LCA among other students and negative labelling of them as the 'thick' or 'slow' class.

Within the LCA programme, there is a strong emphasis on preparation for the world of work evidenced by work experience placements and vocational guidance courses. This aspect of the programme was commented on very favourably by LCA graduates. The nature of work experience and the guidance received are discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

6. WORK EXPERIENCE IN THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED

6.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the work experience undertaken by students who pursued the LCA given that work experience represents a substantial component of the programme. Section 6.2 provides an overview of the work experience programme. Using the qualitative interviews conducted with LCA participants, Section 6.3 considers the nature of the work experience and perceptions of work experience as part of the curriculum. Section 6.4 outlines the methods used by schools and LCA students to obtain work experience and perceptions of the actual work experience undertaken. School involvement in students' work experience is examined in Section 6.5 and Section 6.6 focuses on reflections on skills gained in work experience by interviewees. Section 6.7 then outlines the role of work experience in career decision making, while Section 6.8 considers perceptions of career guidance in outlining the options available to LCA students. The final section provides a summary and discussion of the topics raised in this chapter.

6.2 Overview of Work Experience in the Leaving Certificate Applied

Work experience represents a significant component of the LCA relative to the work experience component of Transition Year and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programmes, and is incorporated as part of the Vocational Preparation and Guidance module which is allocated 240 hours (30 per cent of total time allocation) over two years. Thus, LCA students can spend up to half of this time on work experience over four 'sessions' or four four-month periods, representing the total duration of the programme. As part of the compulsory module of vocational preparation and guidance, students are required to partake in modules relating to career guidance, job search, two modules of work experience and two modules of enterprise education. Therefore, LCA candidates take part in at least two and possibly four work experience placements, depending on the modules that students select. LCA students can also return to a work experience placement if they find that any additional learning outcomes are on offer. In all, the work experience module consists of three sub-modules:

- preparation and briefing prior to the work experience;
- the actual work experience in the workplace;
- a debriefing on completion of the work experience.

The work experience module is assessed and credited upon satisfactory completion, which then forms part of the assessment process for LCA alongside the performance of student tasks and performance in the terminal examinations.⁸

6.3 Perceptions and Nature of Work Experience as Part of the Formal Curriculum

Support for work experience as part of the LCA curriculum was evident among almost all of the interviewees and not just those whose schools had good career guidance and structured work experience programmes for students. The majority of respondents felt that work experience was an important part of the curriculum and that it was an incentive to participate in the programme.

Derek had wanted to leave school a number of times and knew that he wanted to do something practical as a career choice. He outlined that work experience was one part of the curriculum that he particularly enjoyed:

I loved it, absolutely loved it, that was the one thing, I'd go in on a Monday morning looking forward to Friday. (Derek, 21, completed LCA, working in trades)

This was also the case for Donal who had wanted to leave school early because he 'just wanted to work':

The one thing that I liked about it though was the work experience, the day off, you'd one day off every week like. One day a week off, which is good, because you got to do your work experience, what I wanted to do like. Even though I still knew I wanted to do an apprenticeship, and that's how I got my apprenticeship, through that like. (Donal, 23, dropped out of LCA, apprentice)

Niamh, who had always intended to complete senior cycle, felt that the work experience was a particularly interesting component of the LCA programme:

I mean one of the reasons I went for it was the work experience, I wanted to do that. (Niamh, 21, completed LCA, employed)

One of the main benefits of taking LCA outlined by respondents was that it allowed them to decide what they wanted to do. Andrew felt that the work experience component of the LCA programme was a good way to get you thinking of what to do after leaving school:

Yeah, the work experience part is very good, yeah, it's the right idea to get you thinking for when you're going to be leaving school. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

Justin felt that if he had done the LCE he would have considered other courses or gone travelling. He believes the LCA programme led him to the occupation he is in which he enjoys:

⁸ All of these then combine to give the overall 'score' of the LCA (Pass, Merit, Distinction or Record of Experience) and students obtain a Leaving Certificate from the State Examinations Commission.

I'd say if I didn't take it I'd be thinking about another course, I was, I'm happy I done it because it showed me that I'm, that's the job I like, you know.

Yeah, so you think you might have taken longer to figure out?

Yeah, definitely, I wouldn't be qualified now like, because a lot of people when they leave the Leaving Cert they don't know what they'll do and they'll go off travelling for a year. (Justin, 22, completed LCA, employed)

It was interesting to find that some former LCA students felt that they were better prepared to make the transition from school to work and better prepared for the world of work relative to those who opted for the LCE. Many students, particularly males, believed that they were much more focused on their careers because of LCA and LCA work experience than their peers in the LCE. Ronan made a comparison between his friends in LCA and his friends that went on to college in terms of their attitude towards work, indicating that LCA students got real experience of the world of work from the curriculum:

It's ingrained in them [LCE students] they just can't seem to get up and work because they've been studying all their lives, you know, they've had no experience of work from school really. Some of them might have worked but others they actually don't need to work, so they've no experience of working so when it comes near the end it's actually very hard for them to work. They're so used to studying a thing, than actually doing it. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

Andrew also shared this sentiment drawing comparisons between LCA students and students who opt for the LCE making the point that work experience as part of the curriculum helps students think about their future and what they want to do as a career:

I'd say the lads who were doing the ordinary Leaving, I'd say when they get to that stage of thinking what to do they think I'll just go to college because I don't know what I'm going to do. I think that the LCA stands out, everyone in my class went off to do something, so it gets you thinking, it's very good. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

All of the interviewees had undertaken a work experience placement and the workplaces are outlined in Table 6.1 for males and females separately. The interviews highlighted significant variation in the types of work experience placements undertaken by males and females. What is particularly evident is that many of the students opted for gender-specific occupations, with males opting for construction industry related work experience placements and females opting for service sector placements in Childcare, Hair and Beauty.

Table 6.1: Work Placements Undertaken by Males and Females

| Male | Female |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Plasterer | Beautician |
| Carpentry: fitting kitchens | Hairdresser |
| Bricklaying | Receptionist |
| Painter | Car Office |
| Tiler | Crèche |
| Roofing | Nursing Home |
| Architect | MS Care Centre |
| Supermarket | Solicitor's Office |
| Accounts Office | Accountant's Office |
| Garage | Laboratory |
| Factory | National Taxi Drivers Union |
| Electrician | Primary School: Teachers' Assistant |
| Bookshop | Special Needs Assistant |
| Warehouse: Driver | Pharmacy |
| Farm | Health Store |
| Mechanics Garage | Nail Salon |
| Hardware Store | Pub |
| Creamery | Kitchen/Catering |
| | Gardai |
| | Insurance Brokers |
| | Photographer |
| | Travel Agency |

While all of our interviewees had participated in an LCA work experience placement(s), Donal indicated that some of his friends in LCA did not do so because of a lack of financial reward: they were not getting paid for it:

People who wouldn't have went to do work experience because they wouldn't get paid anyway, you know, some people want money and that'd be it, even though it could have been something you wanted to do, down the road you know, it could have been. (Donal, 23, dropped out of LCA, apprentice)

There was also variation across placements, with some employers paying the students for their placement while the majority did not get paid. Andrew was given about €30 a week for his work experience which he felt was a lot of money when he was only sixteen:

Sure you were getting a few quid. I was never really working as a child I used to get pocket money when I needed money off me dad but when I went doing that with your man he used to give me I think it was €30, that's good for a days work when you're only sixteen so I was delighted with myself, used to love going up and doing it, so. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

For respondents who had been earning money through having a part-time job, it was important to earn money for their day's work experience. Donal and Jack, who subsequently dropped out of LCA received money from employers while on work placement. Jack had been working part-time since he was thirteen so he was determined to use the work experience to earn money rather than gain experience:

I went working tiling for my work experience, so as soon as that was asked of us [by the school] I was going working for money, you know what I mean, it wasn't about getting experience, I was gone working for money like, it was something I already knew how to do. (Jack, 23, dropped out of LCA, employed)

How did you get your work experience?

I got it through a fella I knew there, and he got me the start with this builder, just, just on the work experience, on a Tuesday like, that was about €20 or something for the day you work like. (Donal, 23, dropped out of LCA, apprentice)

However, Jack later regretted not getting a different type of experience:

I could have done work experience anywhere and so it was kind of stupid that I didn't it would have been nice to see something different, you know? (Jack, 23, dropped out of LCA, employed)

6.4 Accessing Work Experience

There were a number of strategies that the LCA students used to obtain work experience. These strategies included the use of personal networks and support from the school while others used their own initiative to obtain a work placement.

6.4.1 SCHOOL LINKAGES

Many of the students spoke about how the school provided a link with potential placements when searching for job placements as part of the LCA programme. School intervention was particularly evident when students struggled to find work or themselves lacked contact with employers or workplaces:

If you couldn't find one [placement] the school would help you out and they'd find out, they'd get you somewhere, they set you up with something. (David, 21, completed LCA, employed)

We did up a CV and we just sent it out, and think she [the teacher] signed it as well to say that it was work experience with the school, because at the time I didn't know what I wanted to do (Barbara, 23, completed LCA, employed)

We were recommended by our head teacher, the Head Teacher of the LCA to take four job placements that you are really interested in and that you thought you wanted to carry on and do after school, so you had your four choices, cause you can only pick one in life like, so she told us to really knuckle down and think about it and we did. A lot of them went oh I'm going to pick this now just so I can have two weeks free like. A lot of us wouldn't probably have went into the jobs that we

did the work experience in if it wasn't for the school like. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

It was evident that the established contacts of the school were particularly important for obtaining work experience. The school that Aoibhin attended appeared to have some linkages with employers in the local area. She indicated that her school had recommended work placements where LCA students from that school had gone before:

Did you know them personally or did the school help you?

The school helped, they had lots of places where had taken LCA students before, so if we had an idea of where we wanted to go they'd then write up a letter to say that we're a student and we're doing a work experience and send that off. (Aoibhin, 22, completed LCA, unemployed)

In her interview Linda outlined that her Career Guidance teacher was the person who made initial contact with the employer with whom she had her work experience placement. However, it would seem that this method of securing a work placement was a preference on behalf of the school, given that Linda's father worked for the company in which she had her placement:

The career guidance we had in fifth year was real nice like, because he actually helped me get mine [work placement], he rang up my, the place for me and just asked and then I had to go for an interview and stuff like that, so.

So the teacher aided you in that really, in getting you in there?

Yeah, a lot of people he did pick out places for, if you couldn't get any, you know. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

Derek also attended a school that offered recommendations to students when searching for job placements. Despite this support in place, Derek opted to use a family connection to obtain a work experience that he was interested in instead of using the school linkage. He was eager to work in a garage and got his placement through his father's friend:

I, well they [the school] recommended you go to a few different spots but I actually went to one place, the place I started off was my dad's friend had a garage, a body shop and the, I was out there and I liked it so much I stayed on for two years.

Did you yeah? You stayed, and was your teacher okay with that?

What, oh yeah, because they knew I was mad into doing that, so. (Derek, 21, completed LCA, employed)

6.4.2 PERSONAL NETWORKS

The interviews indicated that the majority of LCA students were responsible for finding their own work placements and this was largely achieved on an individual level through the use of family and friends. Work placements also tended to be found locally and often in the services or industry sector (perhaps reflecting the social class composition of the LCA group: see Chapter 4 for LCA take up by social class background).

Maurice obtained his work experience with the help of his aunt who organised his placement in the local newsagents:

So how did you get that one, say for example, how did you manage that?

Basically my auntie lives right on the road and she just had a word with the manager and said my nephew needs work experience for the LCA, can you do that for him, can you give him something. (Maurice, 21, completed LCA, student)

Rebecca obtained her work experience placement through family connections where a relative owned their own business (beautician) and through her sister who worked in the caring industry. Rebecca was reflective on how she obtained her work experience placement and indicated that family linkages were beneficial to her when making contact with the employer with whom she had the placement, particularly when the school organised work placement did not work out:

How did you find your work placement?

Yeah, well I couldn't get anything, and the teacher got me one up in the shopping centre, in a hairdressers and I went into it and they were very bitchy and I only went for one day and I didn't go back to it because all I was doing was standing on my feet all day doing nothing. That's when I went into the nursing home, my sister worked in there and it was only around the corner from me house, so it was better... (Rebecca, 21, dropped out of LCA, home duties)

6.4.3 OWN INITIATIVE

A further distinction could be made between those who used their family and friends to enquire about a job for them, and those who took the initiative to contact the potential employer directly. This was particularly evident among LCA students who knew what they wanted to do after leaving school. For example, Graham, who was interested in the trades, called into a neighbour to get his experience in plastering:

How did you find that placement?

See I lived in an estate and there was one of the plasterers I knew, lived three or four doors down from me and I went down.

You just knocked into him?

Yeah. (Graham, 22, completed LCA, apprentice)

Graham indicated that the school made students get their own work placement and felt that getting a job by himself was the most beneficial way to go about job searching:

So it was always up to the student to make connections with employers?

It was up to the student, yeah.

And did most people sort themselves out with placements?

Ah they did yeah, because like, at the end of the day if you're not looking for a job yourself and you get the school to look for it you're just going to make an eejit of yourself in the workplace, getting someone else to get you a job like, it doesn't look good. (Graham, 22, completed LCA, apprentice)

Niamh had five work placements in all and used different approaches when searching for each of her work experience placements:

Most of them I got through myself, just writing out to companies looking to get a week's work placement, but with the last one me Mam kind of got me that one. (Niamh, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Ronan mentioned that students in his school had to get their own work placement otherwise they would fail that module:

Basically you had to find somewhere to work, or that'd be a part you'd fail. I was lucky at the time because my sister was working for an architect, so this was basically why I wanted to get into architecture, because of that, so I was able to get work experience in an architect's office, which I loved now, that's why I loved LCA because it gave me the opportunity of actually doing this and I never would have got that in school like. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

6.5 School Involvement During Work Placements

From the interviews, it appears that schools vary in how they offer work experience to students, as placements were either divided into blocks of two weeks or one day a week for ten weeks. As recommended in the programme guidelines, many of the students had an opportunity to experience a number of different work experience placements. Derek and Ronan, however, were the exceptions to the rule because they returned to the same placement:

They'd [the school] want you to move around but I think they seen that I really liked working there I don't think they [the school] were too bothered... most people who went to my school weren't very committed to school, they just wanted to get in there and get out as fast as they possibly could. (Derek, 21, completed LCA, employed)

About half of the students interviewed had held a part-time job as well as having work experience as part of the LCA. Ronan believed that some of his class who were working part-time simply took an extra day for their work experience. He recalled how he was lucky with his placement as it was through his sister who worked in an architectural firm:

You know, some people took the easy option and just took a job, maybe if they were working in a shop they done it there, you know. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice).

It was also evident from the interviews that schools differ in the extent to which they monitor student work placements. School staff would generally monitor work placements by a phone call or visit to their employer:

And did they monitor, did they have any contact with the employer or...?

They called in, we'd be out for four weeks, and then they'd call in one day during the first week and then they'd call in another day, you never know when like, so you had to be there all day. They'd get a letter off the employer at the end of the work experience and see then how you were getting on and stuff like that, so. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Would the teachers be involved in the placement, would they monitor it at all?

Yeab, there was one teacher, there was, the year head, that he used to go out to the employers and fill out, take them a form and get them to fill it out to say how we're doing, how we've, like, if we're getting on okay and get him to work on that. (Tim, 21, completed LCA, unemployed)

The teacher would be called in, once a week because there was two weeks, so once a week the teacher would call in to me to see that there were no difficulties or any problems and that we were alright.

And they would talk to the employer then?

Talk to the employer and talk to you to see if you were still comfortable with it and yeab it was great. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

However, students in other schools felt that their teachers were not so involved in the monitoring of work experience placements:

Did your teacher monitor your work placement, did they come out and check out on you or....?

No, no, you had a booklet to bring with you, and you'd get someone at the work placement to fill it out. But when we'd go back in, the careers guidance, he wouldn't even look at it to see how you're getting on, he'd just look at it every couple of weeks. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

It was evident that the work diary was a central component of the work experience placement for most of the students. It was also evident that employers had a major role in this part of the assessment. The majority of respondents had to submit work diaries detailing the skills they felt they had attained after each day to their career guidance teacher. This would often be followed by a phone call or visit to their employer:

Well you got a form and they had to fill it in, what time you came in at every day and what time you left at and what, what way, like how good were you at doing, you know like the everyday they'd mark good or excellent you know on the card like. (Rebecca, 21, dropped out of LCA, home duties)

**6.6
Post Work
Experience:
Reflection on
Tasks
Carried Out
and Skills
Acquired**

A central component of the LCA is for students to reflect on the learning outcomes of their work experience placement. In the interviews, students were asked about whether they had learned anything from their work experience placement. On the whole, the majority of LCA students were very reflective about their placements and were able to identify specific learning outcomes or skills and generic skills that they had acquired. Aoibhinn had her first experience of work in a car sales office. She was able to clearly articulate the tasks undertaken and skills achieved in the job. She also indicated that during the placement she felt like one of the staff:

I was answering the phone, filing, sending, putting invoices into envelopes, stamping the envelopes, different things like that...I got some customer service skills, with people coming in the door and being on the phone and then skills then working with a team and working with other people. It also improved my confidence. I enjoyed it because the staff were friendly and they took me on board,

as they saw I was one of their staff. (Aoibhin, 22, completed LCA, unemployed)

Many respondents thought that the work experience improved their confidence and ability to communicate with others. Sandra felt that her communication skills were vastly improved because of her work experience:

When was in first to third [year], I would have been very quiet, but then say when I was leaving school I wasn't quiet... with work experience, things like that, it got you mixing with people inside and outside school. (Sandra, 23, completed LCA, home duties)

Do you think that work experience has helped you since you've left school?

Yeah, I suppose it prepares you anyway for going into, and looking for jobs anywhere or even getting into jobs, meeting new people and trying to work in with them and learn more about what you're actually going into, you know that kind of way. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Barbara recalled that she was very shy in school and found working in an office improved her confidence:

So do you think that work experience, any of them, helped you when you left school?

Yeah, very much so. They all did in their own way like, simple little things like, you know, answering the phone, taking messages, I would have been very, very shy now on the phone, I was nearly afraid to pick up the phone, you know, just little things like that and just kind of, you know, before I probably would have, I'd be very nervous and panic nearly. It was a boost in confidence and just experience, you know. (Barbara, 23, completed LCA, employed)

Derek had worked in a garage for his work experience placement and felt that he had learned something from it in two weeks:

I got skills, doing things on your own, working with a team.

Do you think then that stood to you when you left? That kind of experience?

Oh yeah, definitely, yeah, big time, I thought that was the best thing I ever done. (Derek, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Graham was planning on finishing school and getting a trade, he knew that he didn't want to go to college and thought that he would not need points. He did all of his four different work placements in the trades-plastering, carpentry and bricklaying. He also believed that he had learned specific skills from his work experience placements in the trades:

I learned how to slab walls and how to do it properly like, start at the top and work down and fill buckets of water, I learned how to mix dry-wall, hard enough like.

So in a two week period you learned.

Yeah in a two week period I learned how to do that now. (Graham, 22, completed LCA, apprentice)

He also felt that he got a taste of what it was like to work on a building site in terms of how workers communicate with each other:

It would have been my first time working, it was exciting like, the first time I went to a building site, the adrenaline, the craic. It was great craic altogether, they were showing me how the real world works as well.

What do you mean by that now?

You know, young fellas coming into a site like, they get a bit of a doing at the start, they make a fool of you and then you realise what it's about like. (Graham, 22, completed LCA, apprentice)

David's experience of working in a factory also opened his eyes to the type of environment that he could be working in:

I enjoyed the woodwork, I enjoyed the tiling, but the factory place producing metal components was bad. Yeah, it was, oh god, no I wouldn't advise anyone to work there, no, terrible. (David, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Ronan also thought that he learned a lot from his placement with the architect:

I actually got to do a lot of stuff with them, you know, they were very nice people, it was a big office with thirty people, so I got to work on a project with one of them, which was good, I had to build a scale model of a school, so, yeah I enjoyed that. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

Differences also exist among students in the perceived quality of work experience with some receiving valuable training (as above) and others gaining very little from their placements. While Rebecca acknowledged that she had learned how to perform various tasks from her work experience placements, she did not think she had gained any specific skills from them:

Working in the beauticians, I liked it because they were showing me how to do things, the nursing home was good too, it was feeding all the old people, it's very hard like what they've to do, brushing their teeth and all.

You actually learned something from them like?

Yeah, and answering the phone and taking appointments.

Do you think they taught you any new skills?

No, I haven't got any skills, I've nothing. (Rebecca, 21, dropped out of LCA, home duties)

Furthermore, Rebecca thought that the things she had learned in the LCA programme had nothing to do with any of the jobs she had worked in since leaving school (supermarket, working as a cleaner). Maurice also felt that his experiences in the petrol station and in the supermarket and the office had no linkages with the subjects he was undertaking for the LCA. He did think, however, that he obtained certain skills such as typing and computer skills from participation in the programme rather than through the work experience component of LCA.

6.7 The role of Work Experience in Career Decision Making

It would seem that the role of work experience in career decision making differed according to whether career aspirations were in place before the work experience placement. While some students had a clear idea about what they wanted to do after school before entering the placement, others were less clear. Students who knew what they wanted to do after leaving school could match their LCA work experience to their career aspirations. Graham who came from a farming background and had worked part-time on the farm, had four work experience placements whilst on the LCA programme and was able to reflect on which trade he preferred. He had originally started out wanting to be a carpenter but found that this was not for him:

My first work experience was carpentry, it was fitting kitchens but I didn't really like that because it came all pre assembled all you had to do was drill it onto the wall like you know, it wasn't really carpentry. My second work experience was bricklaying and sure that's what I'm doing now...I got my career out of it like. (Graham, 22, completed LCA, apprentice)

David knew that he wanted to follow the 'trades route'. He had four work experience placements in all and used them to career sample among the trades:

I got a carpentry apprenticeship with the fella I went on the placement with. I went with a tiler and then in sixth year, I was in a factory and then I went in with the carpenter again and he kept me on after that. I was sort of working with him the whole way through for the first time. The school knew him, the fella who I ended up working for. (David, 21, completed LCA, employed)

According to David, the work experience placement was particularly useful as he got an apprenticeship out of the first placement he completed in the first year of the programme. For others it was particularly clear that the work experience placement had a role in leading to occupational aspirations. It was evident from many of the interviews that careers were pursued based on the work experience. Derek had always known that he wanted to do something practical, so as part of his work experience he worked in a garage and loved it. After completing the LCA he worked in two different garages. Linda joined LCA because she felt that she would not be able for the LCE. While Linda had no specific career in mind, when it came to senior cycle, she began to consider business as a career. Linda used her work experience placement to experience the world of business. However, there was a constraint on her further career. She could not get into a course offering business with her LCA because she did not have the points and so did a Tourism PLC course which eventually led to a Business Administration course. Ronan outlined that he had a very helpful career guidance teacher who guided him through his decision making. After his work experience placement in an architect's office, Ronan went to college to pursue architecture after completing the LCA. Before the work experience he had not considered architecture at all:

And did the work experience help you in terms of the kind of career you would aspire to go into then?

Yeah, I went to college to do that after school. That was the start of that interest, yeah. Once I had done the first work experience that was it for me, I wanted to be an architect.

Okay. So, it really opened your eyes kind of to what you wanted to do?

Oh definitely, yeah, like, that's something I would have never have thought of doing, like when you're in school you just basically think of, you don't think of anything like that, like architecture, I could never imagine myself doing that. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

Mary outlined that when she was at school she wanted to work in special needs or with the elderly. She pointed out that the teachers had recommended this career option for her:

They [the teachers] said I had the patience for either working with situations like that [the elderly] or situations with kids. So I was kind of thinking about it, when more people were saying it to me I was kind of setting myself to it, which is maybe what I needed, which was good in a way like. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

A considerable number of our respondents had no idea what they wanted to do after leaving school and so career sampling through work experience in LCA was particularly beneficial for this group. Mary participated in four work experience placements and was surprised when she found that she enjoyed working as a teachers' assistant at a primary school as she had started off with other occupations in mind:

I loved working in the school, because I was a teacher's assistant with the junior and senior infants teacher it opened my eyes...I didn't think I was kid friendly and it opened my eyes to think maybe I want to do this. I didn't like the office, I thought I might have liked the role of the reception but that is not me. And the car sales shop was just boring.

Did you discover what you wanted to do?

Yeah because I wouldn't have known I was interested in kids if I hadn't of went to the school, it kind of opened a door that maybe if I don't do my number one option that this would be a second option. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Sarah outlined that for many of her friends the work experience helped them to decide what they wanted to do and in some cases it allowed them to change their mind about career paths they were thinking of pursuing:

But do you think that the work experience was a good opportunity to try out different things?

Yeah, definitely for me it was, I enjoyed it but I know that some girls had wanted to go into certain areas and when they actually went on the work experience, they probably were given the rough end of it, they could see the bad parts of the job and the good parts of the job and in fact a lot of them actually changed their mind, said that they didn't want it at all, gave them a better outlook then for what they actually did want in the future. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

It was interesting to find that work experience during school can lead to long-term career aspirations. Rebecca had experienced a number of jobs and training courses since she dropped out of the LCA programme. However, she still aspired to occupations that she experienced from her work placement while in LCA:

Well I always wanted to do a beautician course since the work experience like, but I never got the chance. Now I'd like to work in a nursing home. If I could get a job, like my sister was saying that she could get me into the place where she's working [nursing home], but it's very hard for me getting down like and getting the two kids minded and all, you know like, so I'd have to wait until they're a bit older, it is good like. (Rebecca, 21, dropped out of LCA, home duties)

Most of the students we spoke to opted for work experience placements that tended to be 'class specific' (as well as gender specific). In this light, Niamh's experience was very interesting. Niamh, who was from a skilled manual background had thought about becoming a solicitor and obtained a work placement in a solicitor's office through her own initiative. She outlined that she really enjoyed the work experience, but was 'put off' by the years of studying:

When I was in school I was thinking about wanting to become a solicitor so that's when I decided to go to a solicitor's office, I was talking to some of the solicitors and I actually got brought to the law library and everything. Yeah, it was really good. But like, a lot of years of studying and you know, I don't know, pretty stressful job and, so, I don't know.

Later, Niamh was prompted on making the transition to a Degree course given that she had completed a Diploma:

And what about third level education, had you wanted to go onto university or, to get a degree?

Well you see, I don't know, things have changed like, I done my work experience and that's when they offered me a job. I would have been thinking about going to get a degree, but I just didn't know what to do or, you know, and then I heard so many stories about people dropping out of college and you know this and that and, you know. (Niamh, 21, completed LCA, employed)

In the end Niamh opted to pursue an occupation like the rest of her family, despite her participation in many varied work experience placements.

6.8 Career Guidance

The interviewees were generally negative about the career guidance they had received. Overall the interviews highlight variations in the nature and content of guidance services across schools. In particular, some of the respondents were critical of the information they received about their post-school options (see McCoy *et al.*, 2006). Mary felt that compared to other teachers who were motivating factors in learning, the career guidance she received at school was not particularly satisfactory:

While you were taking the LCA did you get any advice about what you would do after school?

Not a whole lot, to be honest I would have preferred a bit more from the school, now our teachers were good, but as in the guidance counsellor, there wasn't a whole lot from her, a lot of our teachers were our motivation, our own teachers in the LCA were our motivation, the guidance counsellor kind of wasn't that good. (Mary, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Graham had always the intention of pursuing a trade rather than pursuing further education and was encouraged by his career guidance teacher to pursue employment in something else before committing to an apprenticeship:

So what kind of advice did the career guidance teacher give you?

She just said don't just go into a trade, you know what I mean, go out, work for a couple of weeks at something else and that's what I did, I attended a brickies for six months before I started my trade, just to see if I was fully sure I wanted to do it like. It gave me all the information about apprenticeships which I wanted to do like and it let me [do] field trips and let me experience the work place. (Graham, 22, completed LCA, apprentice)

Most of the respondents we spoke to highlighted the need for more effective career guidance for LCA students. A number of respondents outlined how they had little knowledge of the transferability of an LCA qualification into the system of further education. Ronan felt that he had a very good career guidance teacher who helped guide him through the work experience and the whole career decision making process:

They [the teachers] talk to you about what you want to do after school, so they kind of, steer you towards which subjects you should pick. The Career Guidance Teacher, she basically just read my reports from the work experience, she said they were very good, I still really didn't know what I wanted to do, so she kind of guided me in that way. You know, she encouraged me, kind of maybe gave me a little praise and I think that does help as well. She gave me a list of colleges, you know, and she pointed me to the one I went to, you know, she said this probably is one of the best ones, it will suit you to go and it was good, it was a good college like. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

However, despite the guidance he received at school, like many other LCA students we interviewed, Ronan found out towards the end of the LCA programme that he may have difficulty in getting the course that he wanted because of the points needed to enter the course:

Were you aware that you weren't going to be able to go?

No.

And when did you find that out?

Basically, I just found it out in sixth year you know, you only find out when you start looking for colleges to go to, then you realise the marks you need for this and that and what college takes people from LCA, because there is some colleges that don't, there's probably a lot of college that don't take the LCA. And then you kind of look at yourself and say why! It's unfair, it's kind of discriminating a little bit, because you still do the same work basically. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

This was also the case for Aoibhinn who found out too late that a pass LCA would not be enough to allow entry into a childcare course that she wanted to pursue:

Did you have Career Guidance while in LCA?

We had, I think it was one class a week for careers, and then going to talks about what we can go on to do in college, because we didn't have the minimum requirements for some of the colleges, the careers guidance went over some of the colleges that we could get into, and things like that. (Aoibhin, 22, completed LCA, unemployed)

My brother was talking to me all about the different PLC courses and I just, I kind of gave up on the situation, I thought they're not going to let you in with a pass in LCA and I obviously hadn't my Leaving like, you know, so, I know I could've went on to do PLC and all that and probably could have went higher and then went in but I just really wanted to do something, I just worked [in a supermarket] then. (Aoibhin, 22, completed LCA, unemployed)

Because David knew that he was going to opt for an apprenticeship in carpentry from the work experience, he did not pay much attention to the career guidance teacher. However, he now reflects that he would have liked to know more about options for further education:

We had career guidance but it wasn't great, I had an idea, I was going to go out to your man the carpenter anyway, so I didn't pay much attention. I'd say I would have gone for an apprenticeship anyway. I think the reason I went into the LCA was because I didn't see the point of doing the Leaving Cert because I had no intentions of going to college. (David, 21, completed LCA, employed).

One respondent felt that all options should be given to LCA students regardless of what the teachers or guidance counselors think the students would like. Although David never planned on going to college, he felt that he should have been given information on his options for third level education:

What do you think is missing from it [LCA]?

I don't know, they didn't talk about getting into college I suppose, I know I didn't want to go to college but, they could have talked a bit more about how to get into college after the LCA. (David, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Some LCA students took the career decision into their own hands despite the presence of a career guidance teacher. This was particularly the case for Linda, who preferred to discuss her choices with members of her family. There was the feeling that the offer of career guidance came too late in senior cycle for Linda and that she would have benefited from getting career guidance before she made the decision to pursue the LCA programme:

So, when you were coming to the end of the sixth year, and you were sitting your exams, did you get much advice on what was available to you or on what you could do afterwards?

The advice was there but I decided to look up myself like, because I knew I wanted to go to college and like my brother kind of helped me. I just set up my own, just rang the college in [name of town] and I got them to send me down an application form and just filled it in and sent it down. I would have went anywhere, but no one was taking in like, business and all them courses like that, in college, weren't taking in anyone with a pass in LCA because it wasn't

enough, they told me that I could go on and sit the Leaving again but I just didn't want to do that. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

Many of the respondents left school in 2004 during a boom in the Irish economy and began working in construction or construction related occupations. As economic circumstances have since changed, some respondents believe that LCA guidance counselling and the focus of the LCA curriculum, should reflect economic and, in particular, labour market trends. Jack argues that in the current economic climate, students should not be encouraged to go into construction or apprenticeships. He feels that further education would be a better option for current LCA students:

They should know a lot more about what's going on maybe about the construction end of side, because obviously now you've got kids coming out of school and they're seeing the collapse of the trade and they're probably going to go into it and two or three years down the line they're not going to have a job, they're going to be out of work for a year, because you just can't get any work, so you should be either advising them not to go into construction and say don't touch it, that'd be my advice anyway, to anyone that's leaving, don't go near it, stuff like that, you know, just know a bit more about what's going on at the construction end of it and tell kids, don't be going into trades. (Jack, 23, dropped out of LCA, employed)

He believes that in the current economic climate that LCA students should instead be encouraged to enter higher education:

Advise them to go to college or go on PLC course and do whatever they want, open up their minds a bit more maybe. (Jack, 23, dropped out of LCA, employed)

6.9 Conclusions

This chapter has focused on the work experience component of the LCA programme, drawing on our respondents' reflections. On the whole, the vast majority of students feel that the work experience component is an incentive to partake in the programme, and this was true of those who had dropped out of LCA, those who had been considering dropping out of LCA and those who completed LCA. All of these groups expressed the view that work experience was a positive element of the LCA curriculum. It was interesting to note that many of the males we interviewed considered themselves better prepared and in a better position to make the transition from school to work after completing LCA and LCA work experience relative to the friends who opted for the LCE.

Given the favourable economic climate when these young people were in school, many males opted for a work placement in the construction industry while many females opted for placements in the service industry, particularly childcare, health and beauty. These occupations were then pursued when they entered the labour market. These patterns are consistent with the pathways that many young school leavers pursue (see Byrne, McCoy and Watson, 2009). It is of concern that the work placements of LCA students are so gendered. More attempts should be made to provide a wider spectrum of work placements for males and females. Furthermore, the current recession and the slow down of the construction industry highlights how the LCA programme has been over-

reliant on these specific industries. A greater attempt should be made by the schools to engage with employers in all sectors and channel young people into an array of employment areas.

The uptake of work experience is estimated to be high among LCA students; however, it was clear from the interviews that the lack of a financial incentive is often seen as a disincentive for some students, particularly males. On this note, it was evident from the interviews that some students get paid for their work placement while others do not. If there is a financial reward for participation in work experience, then students may opt to increase the number of hours they work in their part-time jobs. Furthermore, students may opt for the type of work that pays rather than the type of work which can offer experience and more in-depth knowledge of the career.

We find that LCA students use a number of different strategies to obtain their work experience. It may be that the least motivated and most disadvantaged students were using help from school linkages to obtain work placements while more motivated and more advantaged students were using their own initiative or using personal networks.

As outlined earlier, the LCA students generally felt positive about their work placement. Schools are flexible in how they allow students to pursue their work experience either in blocks of weeks or one day a week for ten weeks. Monitoring of work placements also varied across schools, with some being more involved than others. The extent of employer engagement was evident, with most respondents indicating that their employer was willing to complete a work experience diary.

It was clear from the interviews that many students had the ability to reflect on the tasks carried out and the nature of the skills acquired (if any). Some young adults could identify how useful the work placements were in terms of generic skills such as communication skills, team-working and increased confidence but were seen as providing less focus on problem-solving skills. Others indicated how they learned to 'be a worker' and what it felt like to be at work and exposed to the working environment of particular occupations. However, while others reflected on the task carried out during the placement, they felt that little had been gained from the experience in terms of skill acquisition.

The role of work experience in career decision making differed according to whether career aspirations were in place before the work experience placement. Some students had a clear idea about what occupation they wanted to pursue after leaving school and many of these students used the LCA work experience to sample that occupation. Other students had a vague idea about what they wanted to do and the work experience was useful in helping them make the decision. However, many of the students we spoke to, particularly the females, had no clear idea about what they wanted to do after school (a stark contrast to high achieving females pursuing the LCE). These students tended to rely more on the work experience in framing career aspirations, but because they knew less about the occupation from the onset, they often found that access to further education was hindered because of the restrictions of the LCA. This was, however, a general problem for many of the LCA students we spoke to.

The final section of this chapter then considered career guidance. The major difficulty that LCA students face in terms of their future options is knowledge relating to the courses and colleges that accept LCA as an entry requirement. It was of particular concern that many of the LCA students did not have this knowledge. Furthermore, it was not clear among students whether a pass LCA would gain entry to the same course as a distinction LCA. While some of our respondents outlined that their guidance teachers had offered them assistance, it was clear that they still lacked this important knowledge regarding their options. In fact, the lack of apparent viable post-school pathways for LCA students proved to be a disincentive for some LCA students after they left school and is likely to contribute to a higher unemployment risk among this group.

7. LABOUR MARKET OUTCOMES

7.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the position of school leavers one year after leaving school. It includes analysis of their main economic status and, among those in the labour market, their success in finding employment and the nature of that employment. In doing so, it compares the relative position of the LCA group to all other school leavers including those who have completed the LCE or LCVP and those who have left school early.

Given that the School Leavers' Surveys capture all those leaving the second-level system during the course of an academic year, the surveys include a nationally representative sample of individuals who have left school at all stages of the second-level system – including those who leave prior to sitting the Junior Certificate examination, those who leave during senior cycle and those who complete one of the Leaving Certificate examinations. This allows us to compare the relative experiences of pre-Junior Certificate school leavers ('No Quals' leavers), those who leave prior to completion of senior cycle ('Junior Cert' leavers) and those who complete their second-level education. Our particular focus is on comparing those who complete the LCA programme with those who took the LCE or LCVP and these early leaver groups. In addition, we differentiate the Leaving Certificate (LCE or LCVP) group based on performance in this examination, as follows:

| LCE/LCVP Performance | Group Name |
|--|-------------|
| Less than 5 D3s at any level | Low |
| 5 or more D3s, but no C3s (or better) on higher level papers | Medium-low |
| 1 to 3 C3s (or better) on higher level papers | Medium-high |
| 4 or more C3s (or better) on higher-level papers | High |

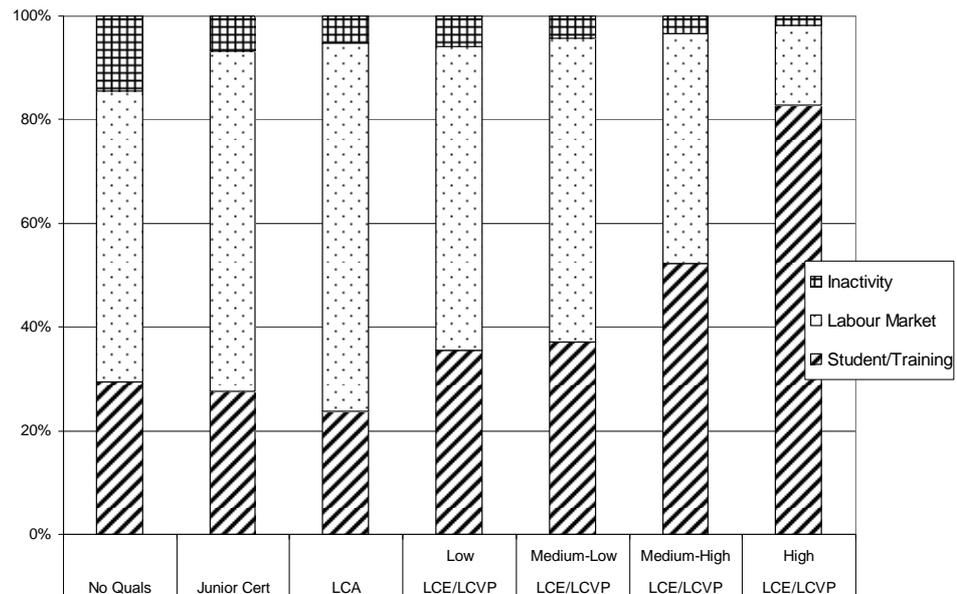
This enables a comparison of the experiences of LCA leavers with lower and higher performing LCE/LCVP leavers and, given that LCA participants are predominantly drawn from the lower end of the Junior Certificate performance spectrum (see Chapter 4), we can compare the relative experiences of LCA leavers with lower performing LCE/LCVP leavers in their post-school outcomes.

**7.2
LCA School
Leavers One
Year After
Leaving
School**

This section considers the position of school leavers one year after leaving school. Perhaps most noteworthy when we consider the economic status of school leavers is the large proportion of LCA leavers who are situated in the labour market one year after leaving school (Figure 7.1). All other school leaver groups have higher levels of participation in student/training activities, even the early leaver groups (which to some extent reflects their participation in second-chance educational opportunities; see Chapter 8 for detailed discussion). Overall among the four cohorts of school leavers over three-quarters of LCA completers are in the labour market one year after leaving school, compared to just two-thirds of those performing poorly or moderately in the Leaving Certificate. Over five-in-six school leavers achieving high grades in the Leaving Certificate exam are pursuing post-school education or training one year after leaving school.

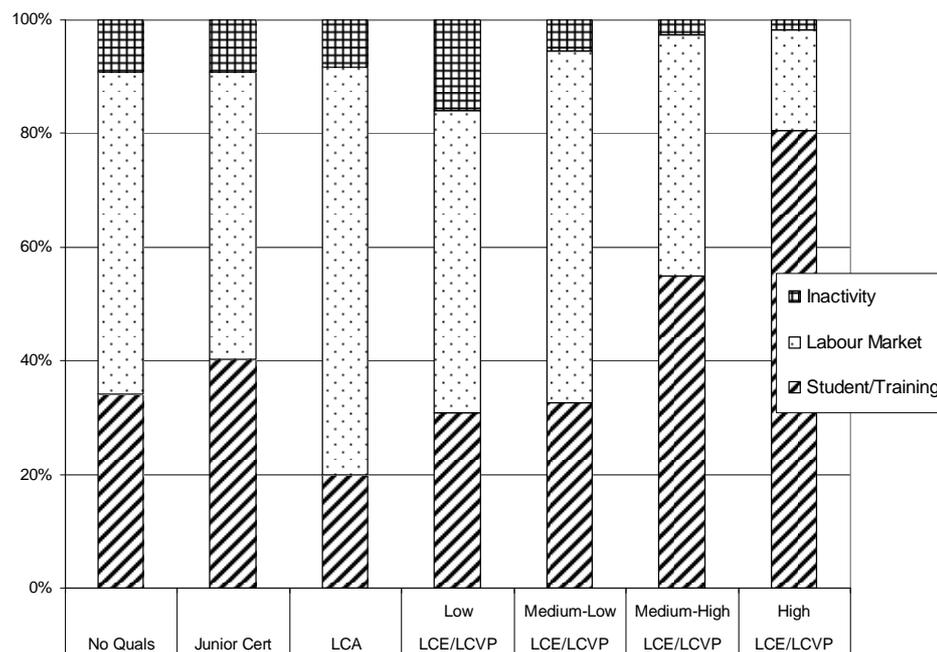
Focusing attention on the most recent school leaver cohort and their status in May 2006 (Figure 7.2), the dominance of labour market entry among LCA leavers is perhaps more pronounced. Early leaver groups have, in line with policy efforts to target educational opportunities at the most vulnerable groups, increased their levels of participation in post-school education and training. LCA leavers continue to have high levels of participation in the labour market, with this group continuing to be the group least likely to record education or training as their principal status one year after leaving school. As developing labour market skills are a key objective of the LCA programme, the high levels of entry into the labour market among those completing the LCA programme are perhaps not surprising. However, the key policy question is how well these young people fare when they enter the labour market and whether the LCA programme confers valuable labour market skills that enhance their chances of securing employment and improve the quality of that employment.

Figure 7.1: Status of School Leavers One Year After Leaving School (2001-2005 Leavers)



Source: School Leavers' Survey 2002-2007.

Figure 7.2: Status of School Leavers One Year After Leaving School (2005 Leavers)



Source: School Leavers' Survey 2007.

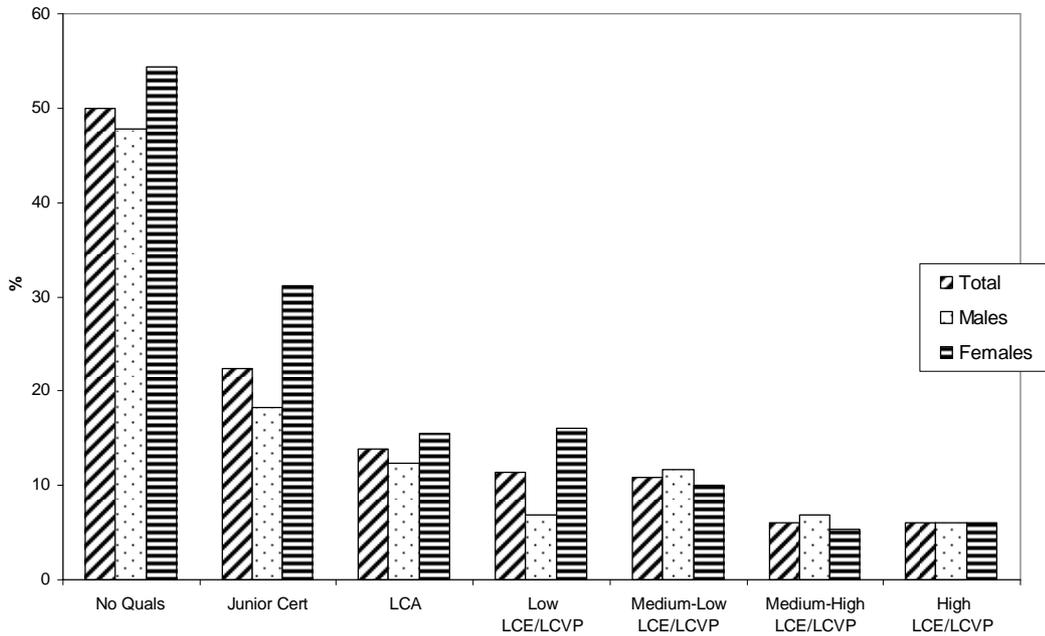
7.2.1 LCA SCHOOL LEAVERS AND UNEMPLOYMENT ONE YEAR AFTER LEAVING SCHOOL

To answer this question we focus first on the relative unemployment risk among labour market entrants from each of the leaver groups, with a view to assessing how well our LCA completers compare to the other leaver groups. Overall, it is clear that staying in school to complete the LCA programme does confer valuable labour market skills and enhance the chances of securing employment. While the Junior Certificate leaver group has an unemployment rate of 22 per cent one year after leaving school, the unemployment rate for the LCA completers is just 14 per cent (Figure 7.3). Across many of the leaver groups females have higher unemployment rates, a pattern which also holds for the LCA group, but is less notable. However, it should be borne in mind that these surveys span a period of exceptional economic boom in Ireland and one in which the construction sector in particular grew dramatically, hence boosting the employment chance of male school leavers in particular.

When we focus attention on the most recent survey of 2005 school leavers we find that LCA leavers have higher unemployment rates than other Leaving Certificate leavers regardless of how well they perform in the exam (Figure 7.4). While 18 per cent of LCA completers in the labour market are unemployed one year after leaving school, the figure is less than 11 per cent for each of the LCE/LCVP performance groups. In common with the pattern for the early leaver groups in particular, female LCA leavers have a significantly higher unemployment rate than their male counterparts. It appears that young people leaving school having participated in the LCA programme are not competing particularly well

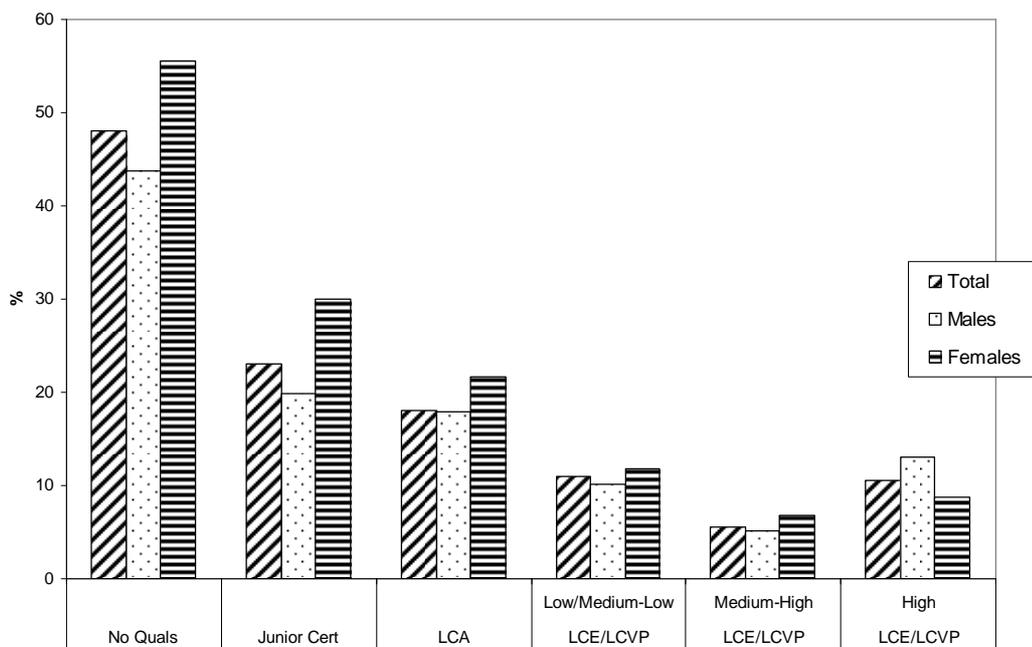
with their Leaving Certificate counterparts, but are doing better than those who do not complete their second-level in accessing employment.

Figure 7.3: Unemployment Rate Among School Leavers in the Labour Market One Year After Leaving School (2001-2005 Leavers)



Source: School Leavers' Survey 2002-2007.

Figure 7.4: Unemployment Rate Among School Leavers in the Labour Market One Year After Leaving School (2005 Leavers)

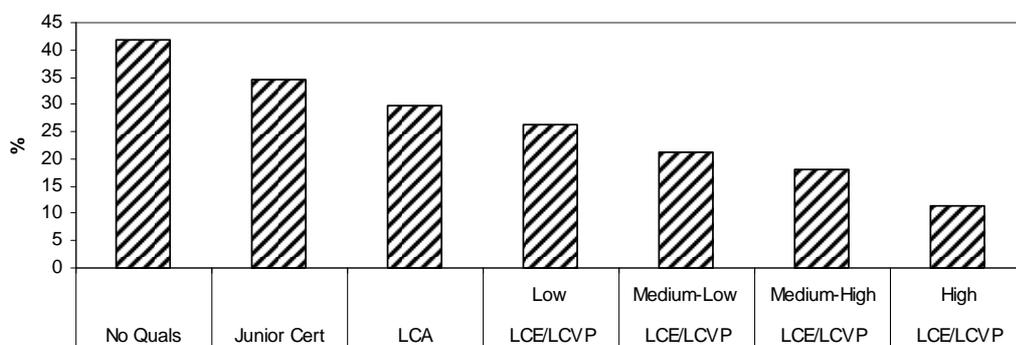


Source: School Leavers' Survey 2007.

7.2.2 LCA SCHOOL LEAVERS AND LONGER RISK OF UNEMPLOYMENT

Rather than confining attention to employment status one year after leaving school, the following considers the extent to which school leavers have ever been unemployed during the early post-school period (16-24 months post-school leaving). Figure 7.5 displays wide variation across educational groups, with LCA school leavers performing less well than their Leaving Certificate counterparts, regardless of performance in the Leaving Certificate examination. While over one-third of the Junior Certificate group experience unemployment, three-in-ten of the LCA leavers similarly experience at least one spell of unemployment during this early post-school period. Unemployment incidence falls to 26 per cent among those in the lowest performing group, 21 per cent among those in the medium-low group, 18 per cent among the medium-high group and 11 per cent among school leavers performing at the highest levels in the LCE/LCVP.

Figure 7.5: Proportion of School Leavers Who Have Ever Been Unemployed Since Leaving School (Labour Market Entrants Only)



Source: School Leavers' Surveys 2002-2007.

When we examine the risks of experience of unemployment across school leavers, controlling for their social background characteristics, we can see that LCA school leavers are somewhat disadvantaged relative to their Leaving Certificate counterparts.

The multivariate models developed in Table 7.1 and Table 7.2 allow an unambiguous comparison to be made in the unemployment risk among LCA students relative to other school leavers. The models estimate the relative influence of gender, parental social class, and level of education achieved at second-level education on the likelihood that a school leaver experiences unemployment in the sixteen months after leaving school. Model 1 of Table 7.1 indicates that when accounting for gender and parental social class, males are more likely to experience unemployment than females. Furthermore, while the vast majority of social groups are less likely to be unemployed relative to the semi and unskilled manual group, students whose parents are unemployed are more likely to experience unemployment in the period since leaving school. Model 2 of Table 7.1 then considers the level of education achieved at second-level education. The regression coefficients tell us that school leavers who have left school early or with a LCA qualification are more likely to experience unemployment than those who have completed either the LCE or LCVP.

Furthermore, Model 2 of Table 7.2 further disaggregates the LCE/LCVP group. We now see that school leavers who have left school early, those who completed the LCA and those in the lowest performing LCE/LCVP group are more likely to experience unemployment than those in the medium-high reference group. Only those who attained the highest performance level are less likely to experience unemployment in the sixteen months after leaving school.

Table 7.1: Probability of Ever Being Unemployed Among Labour Market Entrants (16-24 Months Post-school Leaving)

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 2 |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Constant | -1.016*** | -1.398*** | -1.491*** |
| Males (reference females) | 0.368*** | 0.190*** | 0.392*** |
| Parental Class | | | |
| Higher Professional | -0.752*** | -0.578*** | -0.588*** |
| Lower Professional | -0.525*** | -0.373*** | -0.380*** |
| Farmers | -0.789*** | -0.654*** | -0.656*** |
| Non-manual | -0.217** | -0.139 | -0.141 |
| Skilled Manual | -0.244** | -0.235* | -0.236** |
| Unemployed (Ref semi- and unskilled manual) | 0.185* | 0.101 | 0.097 |
| Education | | | |
| No Quals | | 0.992*** | 1.175*** |
| Junior Cert | | 0.817*** | 0.989*** |
| LCA (Ref LCE/LCVP) | | 0.544*** | 0.844*** |
| No Quals * Male | | | -0.342* |
| Junior Cert * Male | | | -0.313* |
| LCA * Male | | | -0.581** |

Note: From a logistic regression model. *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; Δ p<.10.

Source: School Leavers' Surveys, 2002-2007.

Table 7.2: Probability of Ever Being Unemployed Among Labour Market Entrants (16-24 Months Post-school Leaving) by Examination Performance

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 2 |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Constant | -1.016*** | -1.398*** | -1.504*** |
| Males (reference females) | 0.368*** | 0.189*** | 0.394*** |
| Parental Class | | | |
| Higher Professional | -0.752*** | -0.508*** | -0.519*** |
| Lower Professional | -0.525*** | -0.323*** | -0.330*** |
| Farmers | -0.789*** | -0.628*** | -0.631*** |
| Non-manual | -0.217** | -0.121 | -0.124 |
| Skilled Manual | -0.244** | -0.233* | -0.234** |
| Unemployed (Ref semi- and unskilled manual) | 0.185* | 0.102 | 0.098 |
| Education | | | |
| No Quals | | 0.982*** | 1.178*** |
| Junior Cert | | 0.802*** | 0.986*** |
| LCA | | 0.530*** | 0.844*** |
| LCE/LCVP Low | | 0.503** | 0.518** |
| LCE/LCVP Medium-Low | | 0.193 | 0.209* |
| LCE/LCVP High | | -0.375*** | -0.362** |
| LC Results Unknown (Ref LCE/LCVP Medium-High) | | 0.013 | 0.032 |
| No Quals * Male | | | -0.346* |
| Junior Cert * Male | | | -0.314* |
| LCA * Male | | | -0.584** |

Note: From a logistic regression model. *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; Δ p<.10.

Source: School Leavers' Surveys, 2002-2007.

7.2.3 EXPERIENCES OF UNEMPLOYMENT

Turning to the qualitative interviews, in total five respondents were unemployed at the time of interview, two of whom had dropped out of LCA. This group were unemployed for a number of reasons such as illness, injuries which led to absence from work for long periods in addition to those unable to gain access to the labour market. One example, Roy had dropped out of LCA in fifth year and was long-term unemployed at the time of interview. When he left LCA, he had done a trial period with a kitchen fitting company which he had hoped would eventually lead to an apprenticeship. He was, however, unsuccessful in getting this job and has not worked since then. He has made attempts to secure employment and do courses through FÁS but was not successful. As soon as he turned 18 years he began receiving social welfare:

I would have been up in FÁS and all, they were getting me work ... you know what I mean, do, I was supposed do a computer course there, but I just never did it...It was only about a year ago I'd say.

Did you just go on the dole then when you left school, was that how you got by?

The minute I turned 18 straight on the dole, best thing ever, oh free money, yeah.
(Roy, 22, dropped out of LCA, unemployed)

Roy has become frustrated and has made attempts to get a job or apprenticeship during this time, but without success:

I went for, there was, petrol station down there, I tried that, I went to a gym to be a fitness instructor, I actually was supposed to have a job there, how long ago, about a year and a half ago, I broke my arm....on the Saturday, two days before I was supposed to start working on a building site, me arm got broken.

How'd you break it?

Fighting with one of my friends.

And are jobs tight around here, like would there be many?

Oh, fuck all...Nothing, nothing at all.

Did you ever think about doing an apprenticeship or anything like that?

That's what I was trying for down in [name of town], apprenticeship, couldn't get it.

In what?

Carpentry.

(Roy, 22, dropped out of LCA, unemployed)

Tim was also unemployed at the time of interview and was looking for work as a security guard. He felt his unemployment was due to a long absence from work after he was injured in a car crash after he left school. He now feels these injuries limit what jobs he can do:

I'm able to do certain...types of security, like retail security is just walking around and looking at cameras all day, that's what I'm going for. (Tim, 21, completed LCA, unemployed)

However, Tim felt he had other options and stated that if he cannot find a job he is considering going to college in England where he now lives:

If I can't get any work I probably would go into studying, college or something in England.

Is there any particular area that you'd like to go back and do again?

Well there's a course, there's an apprenticeship going on where there the college where my girlfriend is, she's doing business and administration and then there's a management one as well, management apprenticeship. (Tim, 21, completed LCA, unemployed)

Using School Leavers' Survey data, the next section considers the main industrial and occupational sectors in which school leavers are employed.

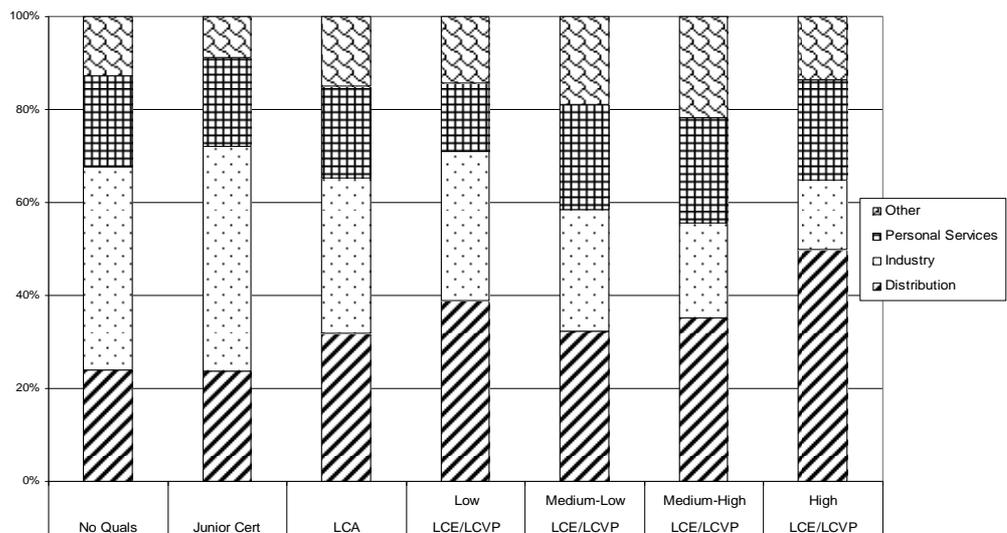
7.2.4 LCA SCHOOL LEAVERS' INDUSTRIAL AND OCCUPATIONAL SECTORS

School leavers in employment one year after leaving school are differentiated according to the Industrial Sector in which they are employed (based on the *Census Classification of Industries 1986*) in Figure 7.6, with males and females presented separately in Figures 7.7 and 7.8. Industrial sectors are classified as follows:

- Distribution (Wholesale and Retail, Food, Drinks, Pubs, Clothes Shops, Petrol Stations);
- Industry (Construction, Engineering, Utilities, Food, Textiles);
- Personal Services;
- Other (Agriculture and Fisheries, Banking, Transport and Communications, Public Administration, Professional Services).

Overall, LCA completers are somewhat less likely to enter employment in Industry than the early leavers. The LCA group display patterns which are not dissimilar to the Leaving Certificate completers.

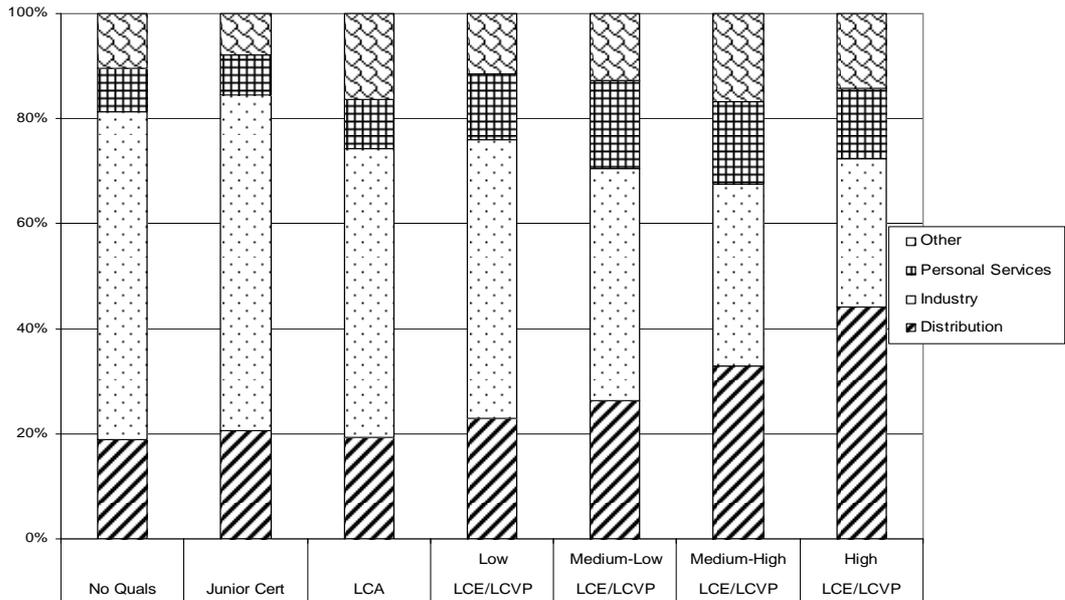
Figure 7.6: Industrial Sector of School Leavers in Employment One Year After Leaving School (2001-2005 Leavers)



Source: School Leavers' Surveys 2002-2007.

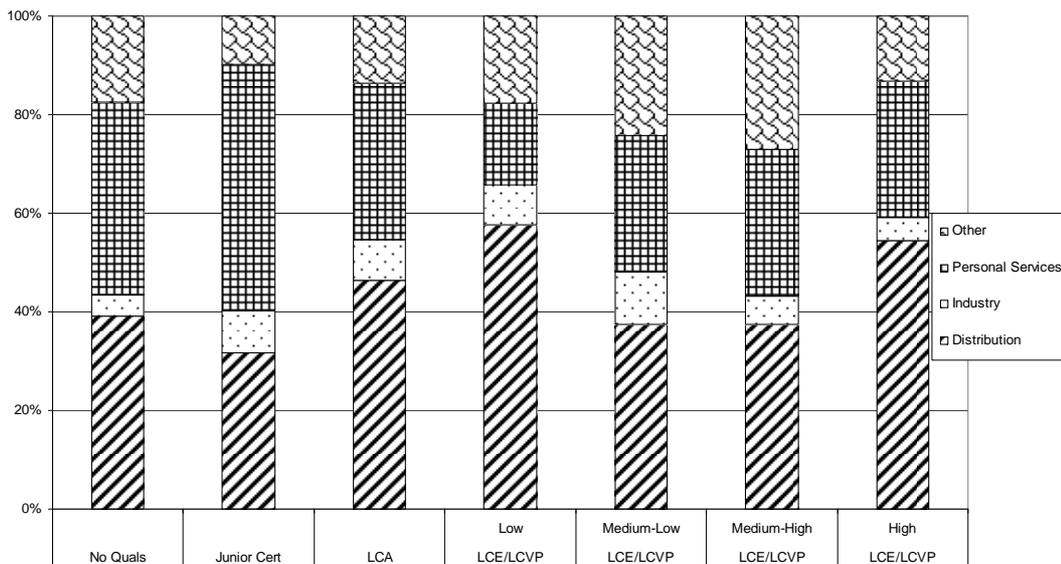
When we consider the patterns for males (Figure 7.7) it appears LCA leavers have lower levels of participation in Industry than those who left prior to completion of second-level. Males completing the LCA programme are typically employed in similar sectors to the lowest performing Leaving Certificate group, although they are slightly less likely to be employed in personal services. For females, LCA leavers are more likely to secure employment in the distribution sector and less likely to enter jobs in personal services than the early school leaver groups (Figure 7.8).

Figure 7.7: Industrial Sector of Male School Leavers in Employment One Year After Leaving School (2001-2005 Leavers)



Source: School Leavers' Surveys 2002-2007.

Figure 7.8: Industrial Sector of Female School Leavers in Employment One Year After Leaving School (2001-2005 Leavers)



Source: School Leavers' Surveys 2002-2007.

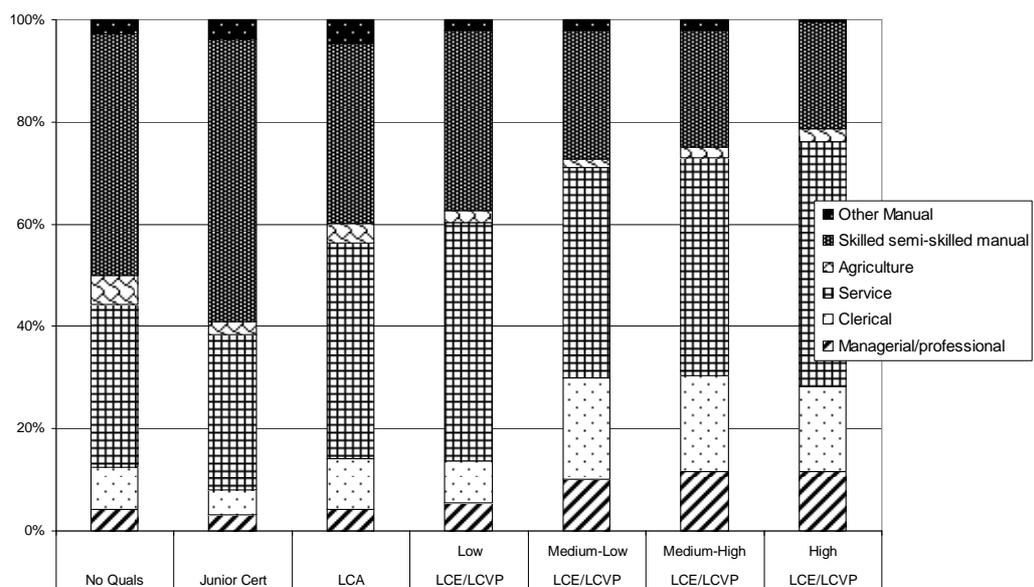
Occupational sectors have been classified as follows:

- Managerial/Professional;
- Clerical;
- Service;
- Agriculture;
- Skilled, Semi-skilled Manual;
- Other Manual.

Examining the occupational sector (based on the *Census Classification of Occupations, 1986*) in which school leavers are employed, early school leavers are considerably more likely to be employed in manual jobs than more highly educated school leavers (Figure 7.9). Overall, patterns of employment for the LCA completers are in line with the patterns for the lowest performing Leaving Certificate group. In total, 42 per cent of the LCA group are employed in the services sector, 40 per cent in manual employment, 10 per cent in clerical jobs and less than 5 per cent in each of the managerial and agricultural sectors. As expected, patterns differ strongly for males and females, particularly for the LCA group. While less than 20 per cent of males completing the LCA subsequently enter employment in the services sector, over two-thirds of their female counterparts do so. Conversely, while nearly 60 per cent of LCA males enter skilled or semi-skilled manual employment, less than 10 per cent of females completing this programme enter employment in this sector.

Examining the patterns across all leaver groups it appears the employment patterns for those completing the LCA programme fall somewhere between the patterns for the Junior Certificate and lowest performing LCE/LCVP groups (Figure 7.9). LCA leavers have relatively high levels of entry into skilled and semi-skilled manual jobs (over one-third), levels comparable to the lowest performing LCE/LCVP group.

Figure 7.9: Occupational Sector of School Leavers in Employment One Year After Leaving School (2001-2005 Leavers)



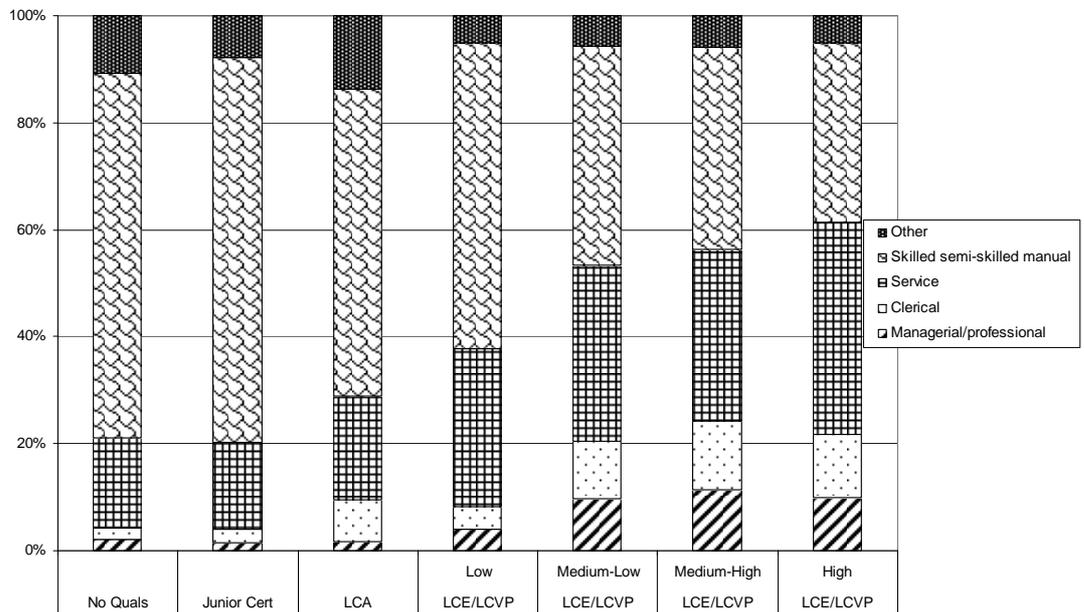
Source: School Leavers' Surveys 2002-2007.

Conversely, LCA leavers have relatively low levels of participation in both managerial (4 per cent) and clerical jobs (10 per cent), sectors which higher performing LCE/LCVP leavers enter more frequently. In total, 42 per cent of LCA leavers enter jobs in the services sector, a pattern which is somewhat distinct to that for the early leaver groups and relatively comparable to all of the LCE/LCVP groups.

As expected, patterns differ strongly for males and females, particularly for the LCA group (Figures 7.10 and 7.11). While less than 20 per cent of males completing the LCA subsequently enter employment in the services sector, over two-thirds of their female counterparts do so. Conversely, while nearly 60 per cent of LCA males enter skilled or semi-skilled manual employment, less than 10 per cent of females completing this programme enter employment in this sector.

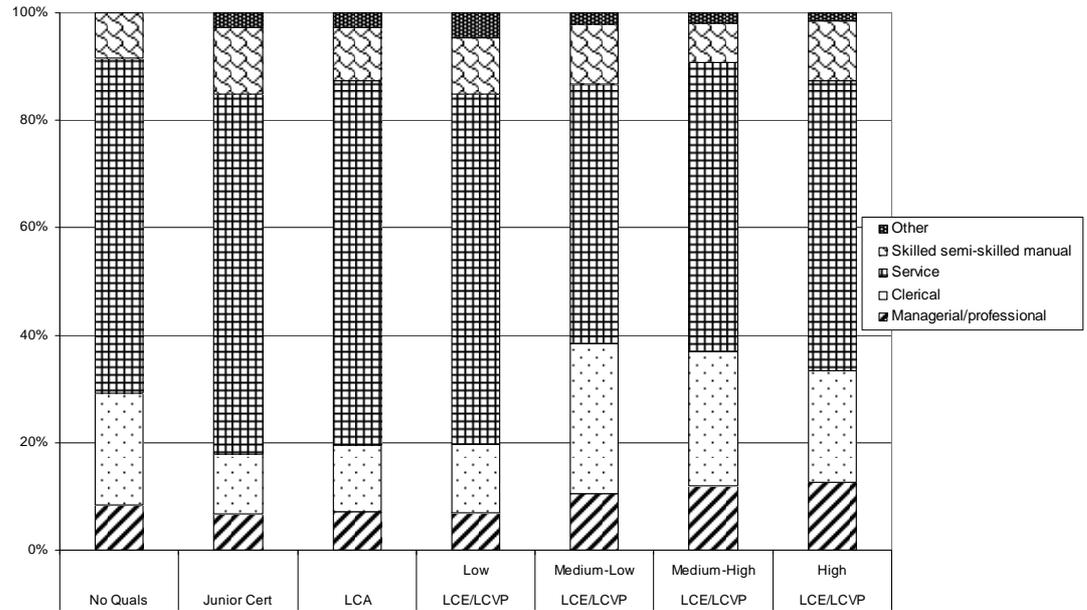
When we look across all leaver groups it appears the employment patterns for males completing the LCA programme fall somewhere between the patterns for the Junior Certificate and lowest performing LCE/LCVP groups. In the case of female leavers from the LCA, their patterns of employment are virtually identical to those emerging for the lowest performing LCE/LCVP group. Over two-thirds of this group are employed in the services sector, 13 per cent are employed in clerical jobs, 10 per cent in skilled and semi-skilled manual jobs and 7 per cent in managerial positions.

Figure 7.10: Occupational Sector of Male School Leavers in Employment One Year After Leaving School (2001-2005 Leavers)



Source: School Leavers' Surveys 2002-2007.

Figure 7.11: Occupational Sector of Female School Leavers in Employment One Year After Leaving School (2001-2005 Leavers)



Source: School Leavers' Surveys 2002-2007.

7.2.5 CONSTRUCTION SECTOR

In the current economic climate with difficulties facing particular sectors of the labour market, it is interesting to focus on employment in construction and the retail/services industries among male and female school leavers. As shown in Figure 7.12, a relatively large proportion of males completing the LCA programme subsequently enter employment in the Construction Industry. While those leaving prior to completion of second-level have higher rates of entry into Construction Industry jobs, the LCA group are more likely to enter jobs in this sector than any of the Leaving Certificate groups.

Over half of the males interviewed worked in construction at the time of interview with many completing apprenticeships (See Table 7.3), qualified or working in trades since they left the LCA. Many referred to the downturn in the economy and had concerns about the future of the construction sector in particular:

It's just the way with the economic situation now and everything, it's sort of going downhill now you know what I mean.

You've noticed it in what you're doing.

Oh definitely, yeah. I'm the only apprentice left in [company name] like, down here, there was about fifteen and they're all after getting let go, so, it's not too bad like.

So you've actually noticed.

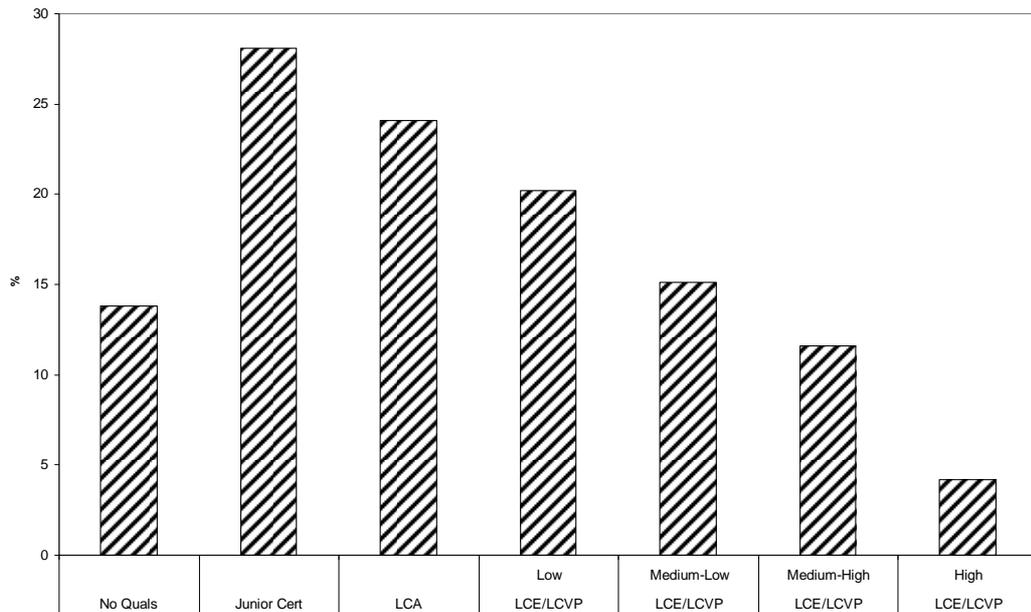
Yeah, big time, big slowdown now altogether. (Graham, 22, completed LCA, apprentice)

Table 7.3: Status and Post-school Pathway of Respondents

| Status | Name | Qualifications 2008 | Year 1 | Year 2 | Year 3 | Year 4 |
|-------------|---------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Apprentice | Andrew | LCA | Apprentice | Apprentice | Apprentice | Apprentice |
| Apprentice | Donal | Junior Certificate | Apprentice | Apprentice | Apprentice | Apprentice |
| Apprentice | Ronan | LCA | PLC | Employed | Employed | Apprentice |
| Apprentice | Graham | LCA | Employed | Apprentice | Apprentice | Apprentice |
| Employed | Fiona | Degree | PLC | PLC | Degree | Employed |
| Employed | Barbara | PLC | PLC | Employed | Employed | Employed |
| Employed | Johnny | LCA | Employed | Employed | Employed | Employed |
| Employed | Anne | PLC | PLC | Diploma | Employed | Employed |
| Employed | Siobhan | FETAC | FETAC | Employed | Employed | Employed |
| Employed | David | Apprentice | Apprentice | Apprentice | Apprentice | Apprentice |
| Employed | Garry | Junior Certificate | Employed | Employed | Employed | Employed |
| Employed | Maura | PLC | PLC | PLC | Employed | Employed |
| Employed | Sarah | ITEC, SIPTEC | ITEC, SIPTEC | ITEC, SIPTEC | Employed | Employed |
| Employed | Derek | LCA | Employed | Employed | Employed | Employed |
| Employed | Justin | Apprentice | Apprentice | Apprentice | Apprentice | Apprentice |
| Employed | Niamh | Part-time study | Employed + part-time study | Employed + part-time study | Employed | Employed |
| Employed | Jack | Apprentice | Apprentice | Apprentice | Apprentice | Apprentice |
| Home Duties | Alice | LCA | FETAC | Employed | Home Duties | Home Duties |
| Home Duties | Jackie | LCA | Home Duties | Home Duties | Home Duties | Home Duties |
| Home Duties | Mary | LCA | Home Duties | Home Duties | Home Duties | Home Duties |
| Home Duties | Rebecca | ITEC | Employed | Home Duties | Home Duties + part-time study | Home Duties |
| Home Duties | Sandra | PLC | PLC | Employed | Home Duties | Home Duties |
| Student | Maurice | FETAC | FETAC | FETAC | FETAC | FETAC |
| Student | Linda | LCA | FETAC | Employed | Home Duties | Home Duties + FETAC |
| Unemployed | Deirdre | FETAC | Employed | FETAC | Unemployed | Unemployed |
| Unemployed | Roy | Junior Certificate | Unemployed | Unemployed | Unemployed | Unemployed |
| Unemployed | Tim | LCA | Employed | Unemployed | Employed | Unemployed |
| Unemployed | Zoe | Junior Certificate, FETAC | FETAC | Employed | Employed | Unemployed |
| Unemployed | Aoibhin | LCA | Employed | Employed | Employed | Unemployed |

Source: Qualitative interviews, 2008.

Figure 7.12: Percentage of Males Employed Within the Construction Industry (2001-2005 Leavers 1-2 Years After Leaving School)



Source: School Leavers' Surveys 2002-2007.

However, Gary works for a large construction company as a fitter and despite changes in the economic climate, he feels secure in his position:

The fella I'm working for, I kind of like, I get on very well with him and he's a lot of contacts so I don't think he'd ever be out of work like.

Right, okay, yeah.

You know, he gets all the Tesco stores and there's about twelve more of them to do like.

So it's like big jobs really?

Big jobs, about two years work like. (Garry, 22, dropped out of LCA, employed)

When asked about the future, some males working in construction felt that they would go travelling and find work abroad:

Where do you see, kind of, going, what would you envision in five years time?

I'll go, if this country quietens down I'll go to America or something to work.

Do you think so?

Yeah, Australia or something, if I had to.

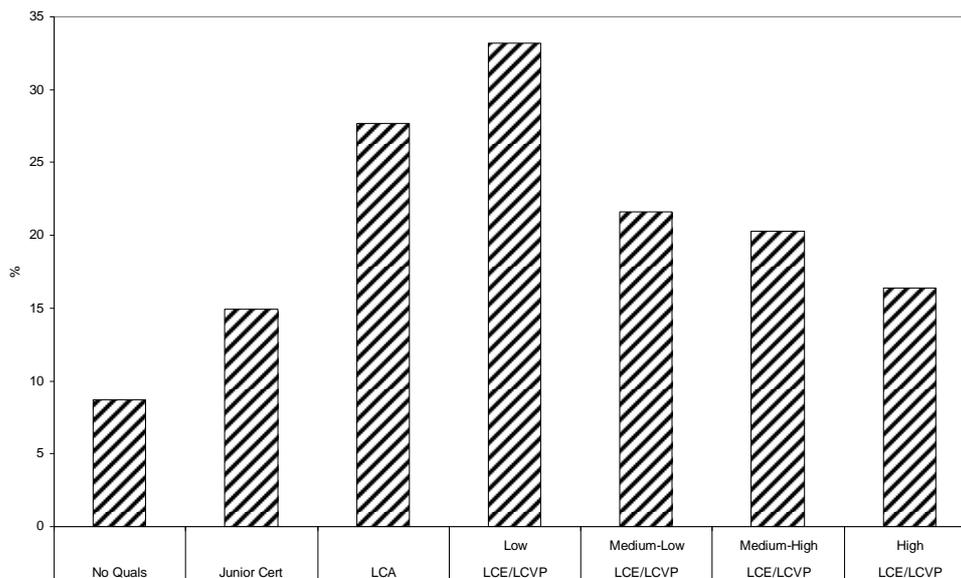
Why, would you notice the difference even now over the past few months in what you do?

Yeah, there's no big work going on now at all. It's all like private work. It's like one-off houses now. No work in towns now and that won't last forever. (Justin, 22, completed LCA, employed)

7.2.6 RETAIL SECTOR

Nearly three-in-ten females completing the LCA programme are employed in the wholesale/retail and personal services industries, as displayed in Figure 7.13. The early leaver groups and those performing well in the LCE/LCVP have relatively low levels of employment in these industries. However, females performing poorly in the LCE/LCVP exam have the highest levels of employment in these sectors.

Figure 7.13: Percentage of Females Employed Within the Wholesale/Retail and Personal Services Industries (2001-2005 Leavers 1-2 Years After Leaving School)



Source: School Leavers' Surveys 2002-2007.

These figures correspond with findings in the qualitative interviews where the majority of females interviewed had worked or were working in the Wholesale/Retail and Personal Service Industries. These jobs included positions as sales assistants in retail outlets and department stores and waitressing in restaurants.

Aoibhin got a job in a large supermarket in the summer after her exams and stayed on eventually becoming a night supervisor. She worked there until recently when she left due to illness:

I was a, a checkout girl and worked up then, I was a checkout supervisor.

And what did you think of the work?

I enjoyed it because, with me working nights, seeing different people, some of older people wouldn't have been shopping at night and it's almost easier to working nights.

What different responsibilities did you have as supervisor?

The extra responsibilities was making sure the staff were doing the work and just, was the staff doing the work and money in the tills

How many staff would you have been in charge of?

There wouldn't have been, there would have been seven or eight to about eleven, twelve o'clock and then there was three then during the night, so it wasn't a huge number. (Aoibhin, 22, completed LCA, unemployed)

At the time of interview, Deirdre had applied to do a course in hairdressing. She had applied for this same course when she left school but decided to work for a year to get some money. She got a job in a large department store which she found difficult due to the long hours:

I left school and I applied for the course I'm doing now, hairdressing one, and I thought, I pulled out of it because I said, no I'm going to work for a year, I'm not going to have no money, so I was working in [store] then for a year and after a year I just said I need to get out of here, I was like the hours would be, on a Sunday you'd have to go in at half seven in the morning, you wouldn't finish until, no, eight to half seven on a Sunday, and you'd only finish on the Saturday evening before at nine, and then you'd be in the Monday from seven to four and then the next day twelve to nine, the hours were just, you couldn't do any more, exhausted, you know. (Deirdre, 22, completed LCA, unemployed)

As part of her work experience Niamh had been working in a taxi company and when she finished the LCA she went full-time for three and a half years. At the same time, she attended a tax technician course at the weekends which was paid for by her employer:

So then, what did you do immediately after leaving school?

Well you see I, because I'd been doing my work experience they offered me that job so I went straight out of school to that job so, that's where I went from there...It was kind of through my job...that I done that tax course, because, we looked after their tax returns, because they're self employed people, so I done their tax returns so therefore, I liked doing it, dealing with income tax, so that's when I went off to do the tax course and I learnt all different other areas, I do me own tax returns and me families too. (Niamh, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Niamh also did a beauty course:

I also done, I done nail technician course, spray tan course, I do nails, I do spray tan...through a college it was just a course that I paid for myself like, so...they were just a beauty thing. (Niamh, 21, completed LCA, employed)

At the time of interview Niamh was still working as a taxi-driver.

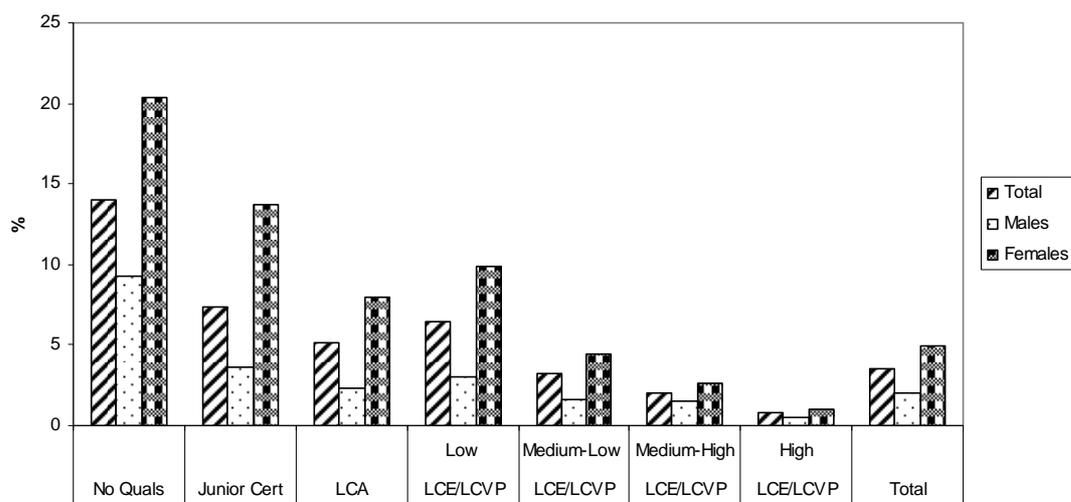
7.3 Home Duties and Economic Inactivity

Across the four most recent school leavers' surveys, fewer than 4 per cent are economically inactive one year after leaving school; including individuals who are engaged in home duties, those who are ill or disabled and other individuals who are not in the labour market. As shown in Figure 7.14, inactivity is considerably higher among young people who left school early, particularly those who left prior to sitting the Junior Certificate examination (14 per cent of whom are inactive). Among those who complete senior cycle, levels of inactivity are highest among those performing less well in the LCE/LCVP (6.5 per cent) and LCA leavers (5 per cent).

Table 7.4 displays a multivariate model of the probability of being economically inactive one year after leaving school. The model estimates the relative influence of gender, parental social class and second-level attainment on the likelihood that a school leaver is economically inactive. Model 1 shows males much less likely to be inactive, along with clear social

class differentiation – relative to those from semi- and unskilled manual backgrounds, risk of inactivity diminishes as you progress to the professional group. It is also interesting to note substantially higher levels of inactivity among school leavers from non-employed households. Considering second-level educational attainment in Model 2, relative to the LCE/LCVP leavers, probability of being inactive is highest among those who left prior to the Junior Certificate. The LCA group also have higher risk of inactivity than the LCE/LCVP group. The gender differential is particularly prominent among Junior Certificate leavers where males are less at risk of inactivity.

Figure 7.14: Proportion of School Leavers Who Are Economically Inactive One Year After Leaving School



Source: School Leavers' Surveys 2002-2007.

Table 7.4: Probability of Inactivity One Year After Leaving School

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 2 |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Constant | -2.332*** | -2.852*** | -2.917*** |
| Males (reference females) | -1.045*** | -1.295*** | -0.973*** |
| Parental Class | | | |
| Higher professional | -0.751*** | -0.551** | -0.569** |
| Lower Professional | -0.512** | -0.327 | -0.334 |
| Farmers | -0.291 | -0.113 | -0.104 |
| Non-manual | -0.410* | -0.308 | -0.304 |
| Skilled Manual | -0.199** | -0.182 | -0.168 |
| Unemployed (Ref semi- and unskilled manual) | 0.747*** | 0.585*** | 0.582*** |
| Education | | | |
| No Quals | | 1.527*** | 1.488*** |
| Junior Cert | | 0.938*** | 1.154*** |
| LCA (Ref LCE/LCVP) | | 0.434* | 0.457 |
| No Quals * Male | | | -0.068 |
| Junior Cert * Male | | | -0.724** |
| LCA * Male | | | -0.178 |

Note: From a logistic regression model. *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; ▲ p<.10.
Source: School Leavers' Surveys, 2002-2007.

These findings resonate in the qualitative interviews with LCA leavers. Of the fifteen females interviewed, five had children since leaving school and four of these were engaged in full time home duties at the time of

interview. Some of this group had been employed after leaving LCA and in some cases had participated in part-time courses. Alice secured a full-time job as a receptionist in a department store when she left school but became pregnant and was let go:

I got a job then in reception like after it [LCA], in [name of department store], only I hadn't got pregnant I'd still be there like...to be honest, I think they let me go the minute they found out I was pregnant and there was another girl there who was more in there like so, I think ... just gave me the excuse there's no work, so, I couldn't really do anything about it.

How long had you been working there then?

A year and three months...and I was getting on grand like, you know, doing it on my own, because I, I took the job because I was taking over from a girl on maternity leave and she came back but they kept me on for a year after that, so, kind of.

So you possibly you would have stayed on?

Yeah, I'd say so now. (Alice, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Rebecca also became pregnant when she left school but had had a number of jobs in cleaning and as a shop assistant:

My sister and I were doing cleaning like, there was a new shop, it wasn't like cleaning, it was a new shop only opening like so we just had to get all the dust and all off and everything like that like, it was good money like, five hundred euro a week, you know

What did you do then after that?

Then I was working in a [name of small chain] shop, across from me Mam's house, I worked there for a couple of months as well and then.

And where did you go after [name of shop] then, what did you do?

Nowhere, I was out of work then, I haven't had a job since [working in name of shop]. (Rebecca, 21, dropped out of LCA, home duties)

At the same time Rebecca did a number of courses in subject areas which interested her:

I went to school and I did interior design and beauty and skincare for a year, it was only two days a week. (Rebecca, 21, dropped out of LCA, home duties)

Although Linda was a full-time student at the time of interview, she had worked in a large department for two years after LCA until she had a baby. She had worked in this job part-time while in school:

I was still working at the weekend as a cashier, I just went full-time then.

And then what did you do after that? You did that for a few months?

What did I do after that, oh I worked in [department store] for two years.

So you would have built up quite a bit of experience there then?

Then I had a little girl. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

Sandra was working in a department store after she left school but left as she became pregnant. When asked about what she would like to do in

the future and whether she would consider further education, she felt she would like a good job similar to the one she had but further study was not an option for her:

Would you ever think of going to take further study or another course or anything like that?

No, not at the minute, no...not when I have a young child now, I wouldn't, because I'd be leaving him say everyday like, and you probably won't get him then until whatever time like, you know, you'd be tired after doing all the studying and things like that

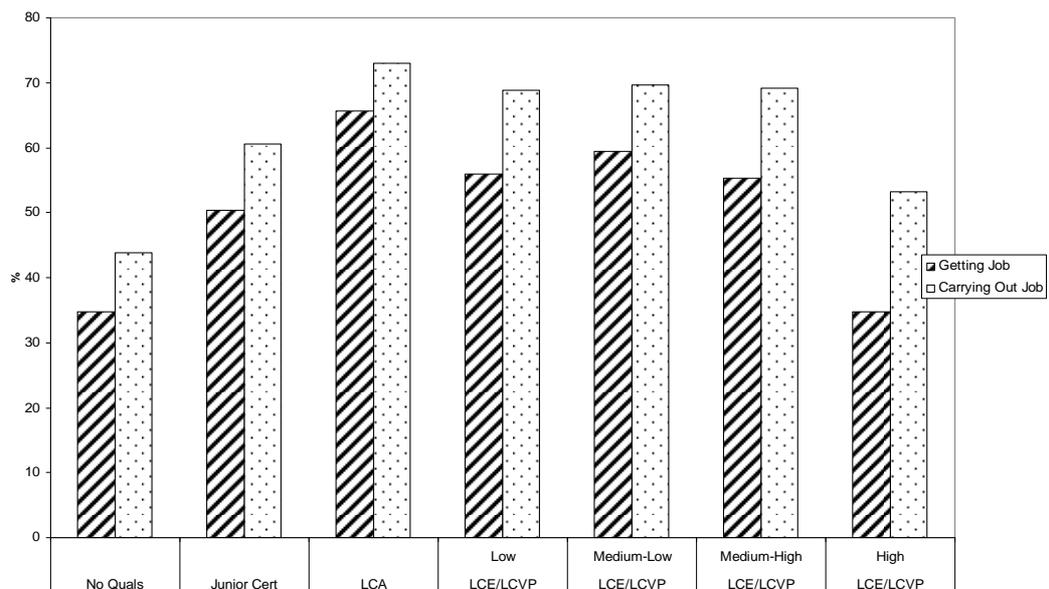
And where would you say, where would you see yourself in five years?

God I don't know, well hopefully I'll be like into a job, but I would like to stay in say a department store and things like that, I'd say that type of work, because I enjoyed it like, because, say I liked say to go in do me work say, and then go home like, like I wouldn't like to be say going in studying then back home with books and studying, like I wouldn't like that. Then there'd be people that'd love it but just for me I wouldn't like it. (Sandra, 23, completed LCA, home duties)

7.4 The Impact of Education and Training on Labour Market Outcomes

In considering their more subjective views of their education experiences, school leavers were asked to evaluate whether they considered their education and training experiences to be important in getting their current job and in actually carrying out their job. As shown in Figure 7.15, LCA completers are the group most likely to rate their educational experiences positively: two-thirds of LCA leavers consider their education and training experiences to have been important in getting their current job and nearly three-quarters indicate that their education and training experiences are useful in carrying out their job.

Figure 7.15: Percentage Indicating Education/Training Important in Current Job (2001 and 2003 Leavers)

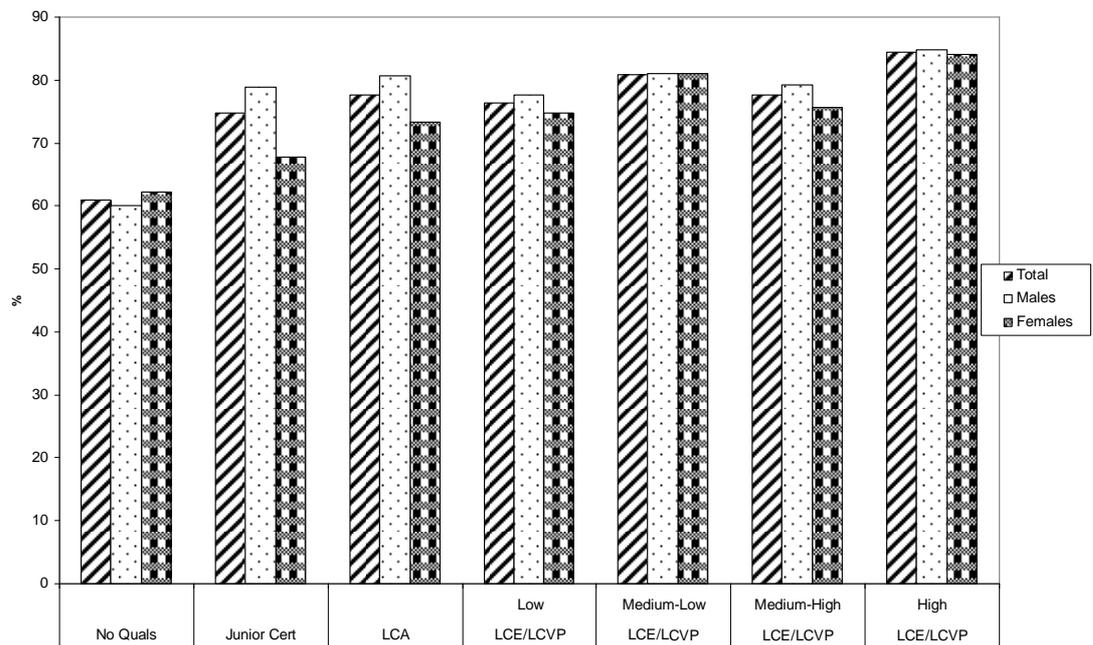


Source: School Leavers' Surveys 2002-2004.

**7.5
Satisfaction
With
Economic
Situation
After Leaving
School**

Finally, school leavers were asked to assess whether they are satisfied with their economic situation at the time of the survey, typically two years after leaving school. Over three-quarters of LCA leavers are satisfied with their economic situation, largely on a par with those completing the established or LCVP programmes. It is interesting to note that females who completed the LCA programme are somewhat less satisfied than their male counterparts, which may relate to their higher unemployment levels as discussed earlier. While 81 per cent of males indicate that they are generally satisfied with their current economic situation, just 73 per cent of females completing the LCA programme are similarly satisfied.

Figure 7.16: Percentage Satisfied With their Current Economic Situation (2 Years After Leaving School – 2001, 2003, 2004 and 2005 Leavers)



Source: School Leavers' Surveys 2002-2007.

**7.6
Conclusions**

Young people leaving the LCA programme display high levels of progression into the labour market, probably not surprising given the objectives of the programme and the focus on developing labour market skills. However, this is of some concern as the programme seems to be channelling these young people away from further study. Furthermore, while the programme is focused on labour market preparation, large proportions of young people leaving the LCA programme face difficulty integrating into the labour market. Their unemployment levels are higher than for any of the LCE/LCVP performance groups, for example. The employment patterns of LCA leavers to a large extent resemble those of the lowest performing LCE/LCVP group – in terms of occupational sector and industrial group for example. However, LCA leavers are somewhat exposed in the current climate with large proportions of males traditionally entering construction sector employment and their female counterparts highly concentrated in retail sector positions, sectors bearing the brunt of the current downturn.

8. PROGRESSION TO FURTHER STUDY AND TRAINING

8.1 Introduction

Focusing on School Leavers' Survey data for four cohorts of school leavers (who typically left school in June 2001, 2003, 2004 and 2005 – see Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of this data), this section examines levels of participation in post-school education and training. The main focus is on the extent to which school leavers enter Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses and state-sponsored training programmes such as apprenticeship programmes with FÁS, the Youthreach programme, CERT (now Fáilte Ireland, National Tourism Development Authority) and other training programmes. As in Chapter 7, LCA leavers are compared to those who leave school prior to completion of senior cycle (Junior Certificate leavers) and to four groups of LCE/LCVP leavers, differentiated on the basis of their performance in the examination (low, medium-low, medium-high and high).

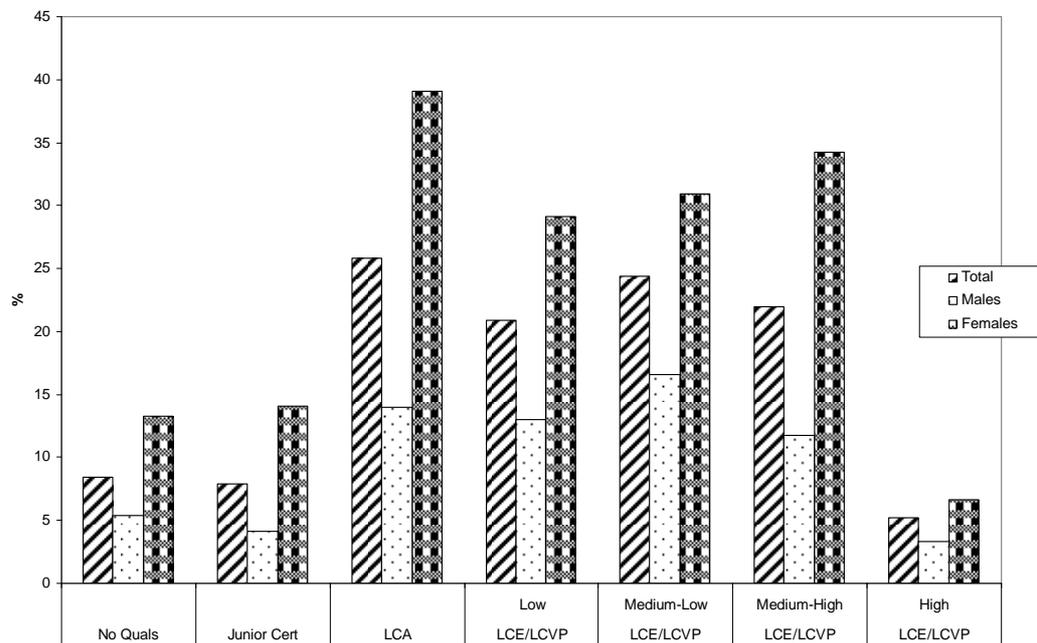
Qualitative interview data allows for a further examination of LCA school leavers' educational experiences when they leave school focusing specifically on female participation in PLC courses, further education, and males who entered apprenticeships. This information gives detailed insights into the impact of further study and training on young peoples' post-school pathways, careers and future aspirations.

8.2 PLC Participation Among LCA Leavers

Considering participation in PLC courses, young people leaving school following completion of the LCA programme have the highest levels of participation in PLC courses (Figure 8.1). Given the entry requirements of most PLC courses, it is not surprising to find that those leaving school prior to completion of either junior or senior cycle have relatively low rates of entry into PLC courses (typically around 8 per cent). Among those completing the LCE/LCVP, levels of entry to PLC courses are strongly differentiated according to performance in the Leaving Certificate examination. School leavers with low and moderate performance levels in the LCE/LCVP have rates of entry to PLC courses in the order of 21 to 24 per cent. It is interesting to note that those who 'passed' their Leaving Certificate without securing any 'honours' grades in the exam – the medium-low performing group – are most similar to the LCA leavers in their patterns of participation in the PLC sector. It can also be noted that those performing highly in the LCE/LCVP have relatively low rates of

entry into PLC courses, which reflects their high levels of entry into higher education courses (see Byrne *et al.*, 2009), which we return to in section 8.3.

Figure 8.1: Percentage Who Participated in a PLC Course



Source: School Leavers' Survey, 2002-2007.

In terms of gender patterns across all groups, females outnumber their male counterparts in their levels of entry into PLC courses, which largely reflects the gendered nature of courses in the PLC sector and, as discussed in Section 8.4, the high level of entry into apprenticeship and other training programmes among male school leavers. However, it is interesting to note that the gender differential in entry to PLC courses is highest among young people completing the LCA programme. This suggests that the nature of LCA course content encourages female school leavers to pursue courses in the PLC sector but points male school leavers in other directions. Almost four-in-ten females completing the LCA programme participate in PLC courses in the 18 months to 2 years after they leave school. While these courses offer valuable educational opportunities for young people and confer important labour market skills, research has also highlighted that PLC leavers are less likely to progress to third level and these courses serve more as an alternative to third level than a route to third level (Watson *et al.*, 2006).

A considerable proportion of the LCA completers interviewed as part of the qualitative research participated in PLC courses, in line with the analysis of the School Leavers' Survey data. These interviews explore the route these LCA leavers took into PLC courses and other educational programmes, their experiences of these courses and the pathways they took after completion.

A number of female students entered PLC courses in subjects which they had studied in the LCA curriculum. Some took courses in childcare, interior design and hotel, catering and tourism and in some cases began to work in these areas when they graduated. Maura had attended a special school where she completed the LCA. As a result of advice received

through guidance counselling, she completed a course in childcare. It is interesting to note that she observed some similarities between the PLC course and the project work she had done in LCA:

It wasn't totally different because it was all projects again, so, [I] was used to doing a lot of projects so I wasn't totally shocked with all the projects [in the PLC course].

When she completed her PLC she got a job in a playschool and at the time of interview was about to start a new job as a nanny in a private house:

I went into working in playschool in [name of city] and then I went to another one for a year and now I'm going into work [as a nanny] in a house.

To one family?

One family, yeah. (Maura, 24, completed LCA, employed)

Barbara also enrolled on a PLC course and did a PLC course in interior design on completing the LCA programme. Again, the advice of school personnel, in this case a teacher, was seen to be central to her decision. In line with other PLC participants, parallels were drawn between the LCA programme and the structure and nature of the PLC programme, particularly with regard to the project-oriented nature of the two programmes:

Did you think it compared to the way the LCA was taught?

Very similar, yeah, and really suited me like...because I really like, with the tasks and the projects, it was the same way it was done like.

So that's a good kind of experience to have?

It was yeah, it stood a lot because even some of the girls that did the proper Leaving [cert], they really now were, struggling because they weren't kind of...I think they just weren't able to meet the deadlines and they were kind of late with everything and because they were late they were losing marks and, you know that type of, in interior design there's an awful lot of work [to do]. (Barbara, 23, completed LCA, employed)

On completion of the PLC course she did work experience in a design shop and was eventually offered a full-time job there where she has now progressed to doing consultations with customers:

It's sales and we do a lot of curtains as well but you do consultations and that so I just started off there working as a [in] sales with the products and just like helping people out with fabrics and stuff and basically now I call out to visit houses and do consultations and stuff like that, kind of, I just stayed there, started at the bottom and I'm kind of getting to where I want to be.

That's fairly senior if you're out doing consultations and advising people.

Yeah, well I'm only really doing that really in the last fourteen, fifteen months, you know, so I do, there's another girl there so I was kind of with her going to a lot of houses.

You're able to train and that?

And just build up your own confidence and that, I've started going out now myself. (Barbara, 23, completed LCA, employed)

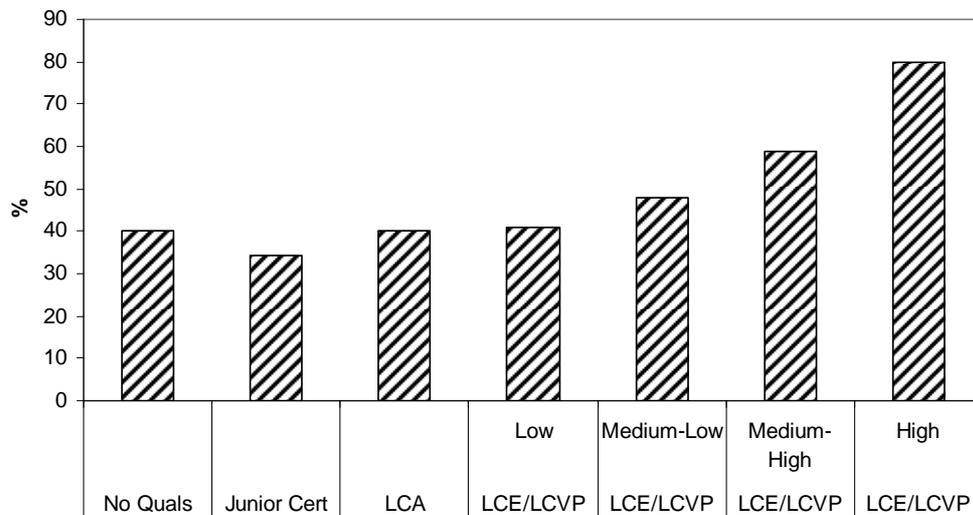
8.3 Further Study

8.3.1 PROGRESSION TO POST-SCHOOL EDUCATION

While participation in PLC courses represents an important dimension of the post-school pathways of LCA leavers, a fuller comparison of post-school educational progression is perhaps more meaningful and provides a fairer comparison of the relative success of different leaver groups in accessing post-school educational opportunities. Taking account of entry into Higher Education, in particular, will give a fairer assessment of the relative progression patterns of LCA leavers compared to other LCE/LCVP groups.

With the exception of those performing at least reasonably well in the LCE/LCVP, levels of progression to post-school education do not differ greatly across leaver groups (Figure 8.2). Approximately four-in-ten young people from early leaver, LCA and low performing LCE/LCVP groups pursue further study in the first two years after leaving school. Levels of progression rise to 60 per cent among the medium-high performing group and 80 per cent among the high performing LCE/LCVP group. This reflects the high levels of progression to Higher Education among these latter groups and the *numerus clausus* system operating (see McCoy *et al.*, 2009 forthcoming for a fuller discussion of Higher Education entry patterns).

Figure 8.2: Proportion of School Leavers Who Have Participated in Post-school Education



Source: School Leavers' Survey, 2002-2007.

When we examine the probability of progression to post-school education across school leavers, controlling for their social background characteristics, we can see that LCA school leavers are somewhat disadvantaged relative to their LCE/LCVP counterparts. As shown in Table 8.1, progression patterns are strongly structured along social class lines. A lower probability of progression among males in Model 1 reflects their higher levels of early school leaving – when we take account of educational attainment in Model 2 there are no longer significant gender differences. Relative to the LCE/LCVP group, all other leaver groups are significantly less likely to progress to some form of further study. Perhaps

most importantly, the LCA and early leaver groups do not differ – LCA leavers are largely similar to those leaving pre-Junior Cert and prior to completion of senior cycle in their relative chances of accessing some form of post-school education.

Table 8.1: Probability of Participating in Any Post-school Education

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 2 |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Constant | -0.309 | -0.021 | -0.098 |
| Males (reference females) | -0.170*** | -0.013 | 0.169** |
| Parental Class | | | |
| Higher Professional | 0.949*** | 0.819*** | 0.806*** |
| Lower Professional | 0.656*** | 0.542*** | 0.537*** |
| Farmers | 0.485*** | 0.370*** | 0.373*** |
| Non-manual | 0.439** | 0.384*** | 0.388*** |
| Skilled Manual | 0.015 | 0.004 | 0.013 |
| Unemployed (Ref semi- and unskilled manual) | 0.049 | 0.085 | 0.078 |
| Education | | | |
| No Quals | | -0.502*** | -0.477*** |
| Junior Cert | | -0.788*** | -0.421*** |
| LCA (Ref LCE/LCVP) | | -0.582*** | -0.564*** |
| No Quals * Male | | | -0.093 |
| Junior Cert * Male | | | -0.612*** |
| LCA * Male | | | -0.074 |

Note: From a logistic regression model. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; \blacktriangle $p < .10$.

Source: School Leavers' Surveys, 2002-2007.

Table 8.2 displays patterns of progression to some form of post-school education across young people of differing social background characteristics and educational attainments, distinguishing levels of performance in the LCE/LCVP examination. Relative to those who perform moderately well in the LCE/LCVP (medium-high group), early leaver, LCA and LCE/LCVP groups are all significantly less likely to progress, with little difference in the probabilities across these groups. Those who perform highly in the LCE/LCVP (high group) are significantly more likely to progress than those performing moderately. These results to a large extent reflect the entry requirements for entry to Higher Education – where the bulk of entrants have achieved at least moderately high results in the LCE/LCVP. Those performing less well, those taking the LCA programme and early leaver groups, for the most part, do not meet the entry requirements for entry into Higher Education.

Table 8.2: Probability of Participating in Any Post-school Education by Examination Performance

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 2 |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Constant | -0.309*** | 0.022 | -0.075 |
| Males (reference females) | -0.170*** | 0.013 | 0.189** |
| Parental Class | | | |
| Higher Professional | 0.949*** | 0.615*** | 0.599*** |
| Lower Professional | 0.656*** | 0.388*** | 0.382*** |
| Farmers | 0.485*** | 0.273** | 0.276*** |
| Non-Manual | 0.439** | 0.325*** | 0.328*** |
| Skilled Manual | 0.015 | -0.008 | 0.002 |
| Unemployed (Ref semi- & unskilled manual) | 0.049 | 0.096 | 0.089 |
| Education | | | |
| No Quals | | -0.515*** | -0.473*** |
| Junior Cert | | -0.779*** | -0.392*** |
| LCA | | -0.576*** | -0.540*** |
| LCE/LCVP Low | | -0.652*** | -0.641*** |
| LCE/LCVP Medium-low | | -0.504*** | -0.490*** |
| LCE/LCVP High | | 1.051*** | 1.069*** |
| LC Results unknown (Ref LCE/LCVP Medium-high) | | -0.600*** | -0.582*** |
| No Quals * Male | | | -0.109 |
| Junior Cert * Male | | | -0.631*** |
| LCA * Male | | | -0.090 |

Note: From a logistic regression model. *** p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; ▲ p<.10.

Source: School Leavers' Surveys, 2002-2007.

8.3.2 EXPERIENCES OF POST-SCHOOL EDUCATION

Turning to the qualitative interviews, while PLC courses and apprenticeships were the most common post-school educational pathway taken by the LCA school leavers, other educational opportunities were also pursued. Maurice began a FETAC computer maintenance course which, at the time of interview, he was weeks from completing:

I decided to get more training...Basically I wanted [to do a course in] computer maintenance...we did all the serious stuff, like taking PC's apart and all that...I'm nearly finished actually, I'm there over two years, so I'm finished in September, then I'm going to start looking for a job. (Maurice, 21, completed LCA, student)

While Maurice enjoyed the course and felt it was worthwhile, he did acknowledge that it took him a while before he settled into the course as he was missing days and falling behind in his work for much of his first year in the course:

I was kind of skiving off in the first year or so of me course, just not really motivated until I got on medication and basically I nearly got chucked out of the college as well, so.

Is that for not coming in?

Yeah, for no attendance in, just poor timekeeping really, yeah.

So what changed to make you go back in?

Just they made me sign this contract, I said okay, I have to get me thumb out here and start getting a bit more serious, so about this time last year, summer came up and the thing is I didn't really talk to many people in the college so that was kind of why then. After I came, I remember last September I came back, I just started talking, there's two guys in my course, one of them knew a mate I knew from my old college, so I said I'll hang around with you guys.

Were they alright?

Yeah, they're sound yeah, I still talk to them, hang around with them today like.
(Maurice, 21, completed LCA, student)

Another respondent, Zoe, dropped out of LCA in fifth year and began a number of FETAC courses in a local Youthreach Centre. Zoe claimed a FÁS allowance for two years in the Youthreach centre and during this time she succeeded in completing her Junior Certificate Maths and doing FETAC courses in a variety of subjects:

How did Youthreach come about?

Because a friend of mine went to it and she was, like two friends of mine went to it and they were saying like, come down, come down and all

So what was Youthreach offering ... what were you able to do in there?

I got, see I failed Maths in the Junior Cert, so I got it down there, what else, I got loads of qualifications down there, computers, communications skills, mathematics, few of them. (Zoe, 22, dropped out of LCA, unemployed)

While she spoke positively about her experiences of the Youthreach programme, she particularly noted the teaching approach of the Youthreach trainers:

So what do you think was the biggest change there, did people treat you differently do you think?

Probably, because the group was so small like and it's just you and, well in Youthreach there's only a few teachers like and we call them by name...even when I started, I called them miss and sir like, and they were like no, my name's Mel or my name's (Zoe, 22, dropped out of LCA, unemployed)

Zoe, with the advice of her trainers in Youthreach, went on to do the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) course and also a course in credit control:

Everybody was saying to me [to do it] and [the] ECDL qualification is recognised all over the world, it'd be one great thing to have, so I went up to the actual course that she was in...and they [the staff] just said yeah. (Zoe, 22, dropped out of LCA, unemployed)

She then got a full-time job in credit control but at the time of interview had been let go and was looking for work:

I was just, they just called me in on Thursday and said we're going to have to let you go because I was last in the door, first out like, they were saying we've no money, it's not coming in.

Did you like the work, what were you doing?

Ringing people that just owed the company money like, just asking them to send it in and giving them the details, that's all I was basically doing.

And would it be something that you would think about going back into again?

I'd do it again, yeah. (Zoe, 22, dropped out of LCA, unemployed)

8.3.3 EXPERIENCES IN ACCESSING HIGHER EDUCATION

While the School Leavers' Survey data captures young people during the first two years after leaving school, the in-depth interviews involved young people who had left school in 2004, thereby allowing a longer term perspective (typically four years after leaving school). This longer term reflection, meant that a number of the respondents who enrolled on PLC courses on leaving school had subsequently progressed to higher education. One of the twenty-nine respondents went on to complete a degree in social studies when she finished the LCA and two PLC courses. Again, she found a lot of similarities between the structure and assessment of the LCA and her subsequent PLC, diploma and degree courses:

Say after doing the, like LCA, it was the kind of thing, like you knew you had to do [an] assignment, accredited marks throughout the year and then you did your different modules and then at the end of it like, you get the pass, merit, distinction like...because Leaving Cert Applied was pass, merit, and distinction like. So it was...

It's like a training ground really.

Yeah its like, the thing like, even now talking to people who are doing PLC's like that would have just came in from the ordinary Leaving Cert they're like, god, how did you do this like, there's so much going on, but I think when you're just used to stuff like, knowing that you had a deadline, and if you didn't have a deadline, or if you didn't have something in by the deadline...your points were down like, obviously they were that bit more lenient on it, they used to like pass you. But you knew once you got in to do something higher than your schooling like, they wouldn't, so you'd have to have it in like. (Fiona, 25, completed LCA, employed)

After completing her PLC and working in a playgroup for a further year, she applied for another PLC in Social Studies when she was 21 years of age. It was at this time that she realised she wanted to do a degree and needed to achieve distinction grades in her PLC course in order to secure a place on the degree course. At the time of interview Fiona was employed as a social worker:

I knew I wanted to work with people and I had heard about the course in [city] and I was like, okay, I really want to go back and, like...I got good enough marks [in the first PLC course] but it wasn't like, you'd want to get distinctions if you wanted to get into the likes of [name of IT], so I was like, now it's my time like, three years after finishing school...now I know that I can go on and do something else like and I'm prepared to work at what I want...I wanted a proper job in something and then I ended up going to [city] and I worked through the course and I got my ten distinctions and applied through the CAO and then got into [a degree course]. (Fiona, 25, completed LCA, employed)

Not all of those who entered post school education (PLCs or other pathways) were positive about their experiences. Some felt they took courses that either did not suit them or in which they had little interest. A number of respondents dropped out of PLC courses as they felt ill-prepared for the pace of instruction or struggled with the practicalities of going to college. Ronan, for example, chose a PLC in Computer Aided Design, something he had found interesting in his LCA work experience. However, he found the transition to a PLC course difficult as he had a lot of travel and was struggling financially:

I done a year and a half in that and then, due to circumstances I didn't finish it...I would have liked to, but I was just, there was just too much going on at the time, so I didn't.

And did you go back to do it?

Yeah, I went back as well for, I'd say half a year, but you know by this stage a lot of my friends were actually gone up ahead of me and it wasn't even that it was just the fact that, you know, no income, it's hard like when you just, you've no income coming in, your family tries to support you as much as they can, you know, I got the grant the first year but I didn't get it the second time

And why was that?

Just, I don't know, I was just, there was lots of reasons I just, it's the whole system, so, and I was getting two buses up every day and it's, it's very hard. (Ronan, 25, completed LCA, apprentice)

Alice also participated in a PLC programme, but found the transition from LCA to the course too difficult. She also missed a lot of days due to her mother being sick. Influenced by her father to complete the course, she managed to sit the exams but struggled all the way through to keep up with the pace:

Then I done a course in [name of town], it was an IT course, you know, all that but I didn't get on well in that really, very, very hard and then I missed time because my mother was sick and couldn't concentrate I suppose.

So you mentioned that you went to do an IT course in [name of town], what made you choose that?

Really because I'd no job kind of, I didn't know what else to do so I decided I'd do it kind of, you know, and then I was already after saying I'd do it and then daddy wouldn't let me not do it, he kind of made me do it, so.

And you didn't complete it?

I did it, I done it and all and I think I even done the exams ... only passed two subjects or something.

And do you think the LCA course prepares you to go on to study?

I suppose, it would, yeah, well it made me think I wanted to do it then when I did it I thought it was hard, really hard, then I missed so much time then because my mother [was sick], I suppose it's hard to catch up and that. (Alice, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

This experience appears to have had a negative impact on Alice's confidence and at the time of interviews she was unsure whether she would participate in further studies again:

Would you ever think of going back to study?

Just an evening thing maybe if anyway, you know, other than that now after the PLC course ...

Why did it turn you off them [other courses]?

I just thought it was very hard like, I felt thick or something, I just couldn't do it kind of, and then I had friends I met over there and I suppose they were in more and they actually ended up passing like, they were all saying that they wouldn't pass and they did like. So I kind of felt worse.

Yeah, but maybe it was just that course wasn't for you?

I suppose, maybe something different, some, I don't know what though, you know, sometimes you don't know. (Alice, 22, completed LCA, home duties)

Sandra was influenced by her friends who were continuing on to further education after school. She too began a PLC course in Childcare but did not complete the course. She did not enjoy it and similar to her feelings about LCA teachers, she felt the college teachers did not push students enough:

I didn't enjoy the college that I did go to, because I did childcare and then I went to a college like and I didn't want to do it then ... the teachers that I had in the college, it was the same kind of, well do it if you want, if you don't, leave it, when you needed someone to push you and say do it, like you have to do it or, and you wouldn't have done it then like. (Sandra, 23, completed LCA, home duties)

Linda entered a course but did not complete it: she enrolled on to a FETAC course in travel and tourism but left after her first year as she did not enjoy the course and felt she would need to complete at least four years training in that area for it to be worthwhile:

I finished in June I passed my first year and I just didn't, I had no interest, I was just really wanted to stay at work then, I was working as a cashier in [name if town] and I then I just stuck with that for a while.

So you've no, the course didn't do anything for you?

No, no. I think that if I had finished, because I finished when I was seventeen, I think if I had my Leaving, I finished and I done well with that, I'd probably be still in college now in my fourth or fifth year, you know after that, because travel and tourism wasn't really, I knew it was a small course but I probably wouldn't get anything out of it after two years after it so, I decided to leave it. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

She secured a job as a cashier in a large supermarket but had a baby and during her maternity leave decided to leave the job as she was fearful that with a child she would never leave. With encouragement from her mother, brother and boyfriend she decided to go back to college to study full-time:

I took my maternity leave and then, I just decided that I didn't want to go back, I went in and had a chat with my boss and I told her that I'd do weekends for a while, because I said I know it's not something that I'm going to do for the rest of my life and I know if I stayed there I probably would have... Well when I was pregnant I was thinking, you know... I'd like something better than working in cashier, I've nothing against it you know, I thought I'd probably get lazy and stay at home with a child and I just didn't want that and then my brother and [name of boyfriend] were just saying to me that, about doing courses and all of that, so I

just said I wanted to do something in the business, industry and that was the best course out of them so I just picked that one. (Linda, 21, completed LCA, student)

8.3.4 SKILLS MISMATCH

The interviews also highlighted how some of the respondents who went on to post-school education were not successful in finding work in their specialised area. Siobhan began a one year FETAC course in FÁS in childcare in the September after she left school but was unsuccessful in subsequently finding work in a childcare setting. Instead she secured employment in a variety of shops and restaurants. She worked in a fast food restaurant at night for over a year which she did not like:

They [fast food chain] had me on nights all the time...so they knew that the place would be all clean and everything, one or two nights I had to count the money from the tills...I'd be serving...there might be times cooking food and stuff.

How long did you stay at that for?

I think I stayed there for a year but I didn't even like it and then when another job came up I said I'll try it just to see. (Siobhan, 25, completed LCA, employed)

At the time of interview she had been working in a newsagent for over two years. When asked if she would consider further study, she was not sure she would 'get through it':

Would you ever think of going on to do further studying?

I don't know, would I or not, that's the one thing, like if I went on further, it's a lot of project work and stuff, but I'd get through it if I had to, but that's not great like, the greatest thing about me

And if it meant that you were going to get work specifically with children or in the area that you want to work in, would you think you'd do it?

Oh yeah, I definitely would do it, yeah. (Siobhan, 25, completed LCA, employed)

Sarah also found it difficult to find employment in the field in which she secured qualifications. Having completed the LCA programme, she began a two year beauty course, again identifying information and advice received from her guidance counsellor as central to her decision to pursue this course. She now works in a pharmacy and has found it difficult to secure employment in her specialised area:

I did a beauty therapy course in a private college in [town].

And how did you decide on that?

Well I'd always wanted to do it anyway, so, it just like, that was basically it, it was in my head, I just had to get it done.

And where did you learn about that course, did you?

Through the guidance counsellor, she had all the information and stuff, so.

Okay, and how did you find that course, were you glad you took it and?

Yeah, really glad I did it, I haven't, haven't done work with it like, since I've done it, but I would definitely go back and do a refresher courses and stuff and

*even do more courses to head into it, because I, I got ITEC...qualifications out of it like, so, yeah.*⁹ (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

At the time of interview Sarah was considering going travelling and did not rule out going to college as a mature student:

I will go back to college again, I mean I'm only twenty one, I'm going to go back again and do something else like, you know, but not until I, as I said, travelled a bit more and that.

Okay, so that's where the goal now is?

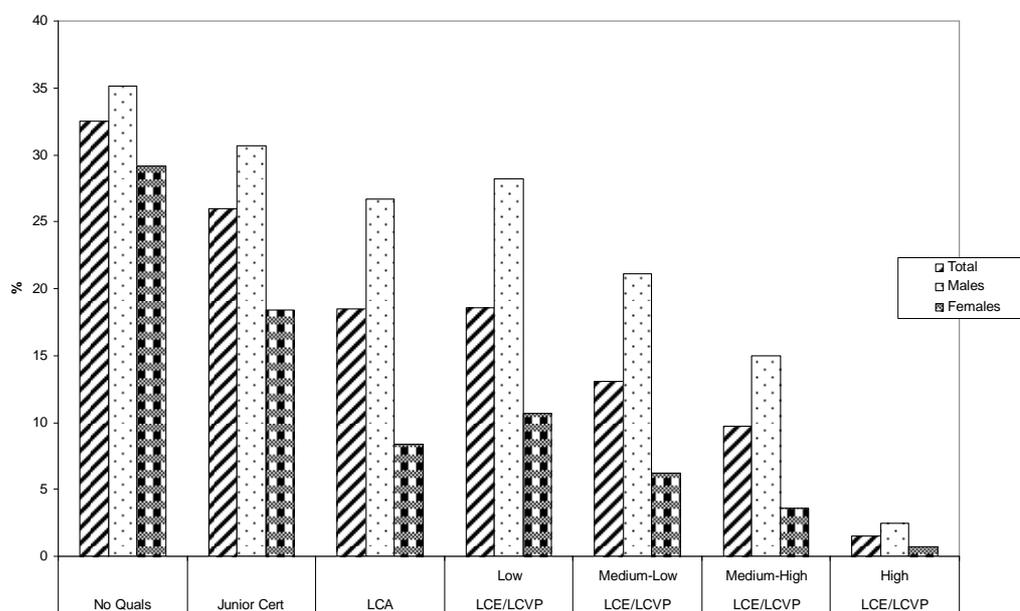
Yeah, at the moment, yeah. (Sarah, 21, completed LCA, employed)

8.4 State- sponsored Training Programmes

8.4.1 PATTERNS OF ENTRY TO STATE-SPONSORED TRAINING

Patterns of participation in state-sponsored training programmes are somewhat the reverse of the patterns for PLC participation as shown in Figure 8.3. First, those leaving school prior to completion have high levels of entry, particularly young people who leave prior to sitting the Junior Certificate examination. This reflects the objectives of courses such as the Youthreach programme which aim to provide second-chance educational opportunities for early school leavers. Our LCA leaver group are less likely than these early school leavers to pursue state-sponsored training opportunities on leaving school. However, comparing the LCA group to the other school completers, they have relatively high levels of participation

Figure 8.3: Participation in Post-school State Sponsored Training Programmes



Source: School Leavers' Survey, 2002-2007

⁹ ITEC is the qualification awarded by the International Therapy Training Council.

and mirror closely the patterns for those who are low performers in the LCE/LCVP examination. Overall, nearly one-in-five young people leaving school having completed the LCA programme subsequently pursue state sponsored training programmes. Again the gender differential is particularly notable for the LCA group with 27 per cent of LCA males entering state-sponsored training relative to just 8 per cent of females.

8.4.2 EXPERIENCES OF STATE-SPONSORED TRAINING

Of the seven male respondents who went into apprenticeships when they left school, two had dropped out of LCA to take up their positions. Some of this group felt the LCA work experience prepared them for their apprenticeships; however, others were surprised at the difficulty of the exams (Maths in particular) and their training weeks in FÁS. Andrew started an apprenticeship when he completed the LCA and at the time of interview was due to qualify. He found the transition to work difficult but felt he learned a lot from the experience of the people he was working with:

Yeah, the skills I really learned is when I went off and worked, you know, learned that, you knew that you were going to be working with fellas who were twenty years working in a career as an electrician, they're probably not going to like young lads, they're going to be hard on young lads coming through, you know, just to let you know you're not going to have it easy.

And do you think the LCA would have set you up for that?

When I went off and done the work experience, I knew what was coming, I knew it wasn't going to be ah howya, thanks for joining, I knew there was going to be some men, some old lads who were going to be ... when you start off like, especially if you're young, they're very tough on you, they're trying to, they've probably seen it all before with kids coming out of school and they're gone after two weeks, so they're not, they're testing your, probably your discipline as well ... that probably helped me big time, yeah, arriving on time, being punctual, because your man was like that, the fella I worked with, if you weren't on time, there's no point even going to work, you know. That's the difference out there like, you know. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

He has found the exams difficult, particularly Maths, but decided to work harder and he has successfully passed everything so far:

And how do you think they will go like, do you know?

The ones I did there last September were the hardest, they were absolutely monster, I've never seen anything like it. ... it's a ten week course, it took us a year's work in ten weeks, this is how heavy it is and you know, there's no, you're either good or you're not good, you know what I mean, and I knew the challenge I was facing ... I was going to have to really give it everything, full attention, stop going out, never really went out, just stayed in ... I don't know how I did it like, but I suppose the hard work paid off ... I remember six weeks into it remember saying I don't know if I'm going to get this, because I hadn't got a clue, you just keep rehearsing, rehearsing things and it comes to you, it just clicked on the last week, I was delighted, and when the exams came I just knew what I was doing, thank god. I was really worrying back then. (Andrew, 21, completed LCA, apprentice)

Graham worked as a blocklayer when he left school and after six months found an employer who took him on as an apprentice. He works for a large construction company and is in the final stages of his apprenticeship:

I'm still with the same company, yeah, still with the same old fella that's teaching me the whole time...Just moving around, building site to building site.
(Graham, 22, completed LCA, apprentice)

Although he found the pace of instruction in his first session in FÁS too slow, he then moved to Dublin for a second session with FÁS which he found more challenging and enjoyed:

Went back out on site for another five or six months and then I got called up to Dublin for my, for ten weeks in college then as well, that was much harder.

When you say it was much harder, how did it differ like?

There was just stuff I never done before like, you know.

So did you find it challenging or were you kind of into it like?

Ab big time yeah, because I was away from home then as well I was studying more and just reading more and more.

That would have been a whole new real experience I suppose wouldn't it?

It was great, yeah.

Did you enjoy it?

Loved it. (Graham, 22, completed LCA, apprentice)

Jack has recently qualified as a tiler and now owns his own tiling business. He left LCA in fifth year for a job in a factory but his employer would not keep him on unless he completed school so he left and got an apprenticeship with a tiling company:

He said look I told you to go back, I don't want you here I said, I want you to get an education, come back to me then. ... I was there about six months and he told me to go back and get me Leaving Cert, he said you'd be better off than working in a factory, so I left that factory and I became an apprentice tiler, went from there then, now I own my own business. (Jack, 23, dropped out of LCA, employed)

Jack had enjoyed the LCA and felt it gave him a good idea of what it was going to be like in the labour force:

I found it [the LCA] was a good eye opener into the fact that you were going to leave and go straight into the work force, do you get me?

Right, okay.

As far as it went like that, if you were to be still in school and it got you a lot wiser on things that you were about to walk into you know, the likes of everyday life and what you needed. There was some things, don't get me wrong, they didn't give you everything you needed to know. (Jack, 23, dropped out of LCA, employed)

Donal also left school in the summer of fifth year to begin his apprenticeship as a plasterer:

In the summer ... I got my apprenticeship, I'd take it, so that was it then and there, he [employer] signed me up with FÁS and the whole lot then, so once I signed up I knew it was legit then, you know, most people don't sign you up. (Donal, 23, dropped out of LCA, apprentice)

He also enjoyed his time in FÁS and felt more able to study having worked for a period beforehand:

I found that when I went out working first ... I wouldn't have been too keen on going straight to college, but the way I was sort of broken into it, the few months working before that, I felt comfortable, I wouldn't have been too comfortable working before that and then I was sent away to Dublin twice. (Donal, 23, dropped out of LCA, apprentice)

He felt that he was more engaged with his work because he had an interest in it:

Did you find any similarities between school and FÁS?

[No] Because we were more interested in what we were doing [in the apprenticeship] you see.

Okay.

And you had to get it right otherwise, that was it.

And how did they assess you in FÁS, how, was there exams?

You'd different tests, you had practical, theory test, three practical and three theory and inside then outside, you had to do all in the little cubicle, you know...about twenty lads, twenty lads with a little cubicle each and we plastered in that Monday to Thursday, and half day on a Friday and we were in the class for the half day on the Friday, just learning about different types of, it was grand, everyone liked it and everyone went there to do work there. (Donal, 23, dropped out of LCA, apprentice)

Two of the respondents had intended to do apprenticeships but found that their employers had not sent the necessary papers through to FÁS in time. Both have been working in trades since they completed the LCA. Garry left school in fifth year to start an apprenticeship but his employer did not send his papers through to FÁS. He felt that it was too late to start again and decided to take a new job with a higher salary:

And did you start an apprenticeship then?

No, I was supposed to but it ended up then, I got a job and he said he'd give me the apprenticeship and I was working away there for him for about a year, I thought he was after putting me through but he never put me through to the thing [registered apprenticeship].

To FÁS?

Yeah, so I was working with him and then I went off to another fella and I said I'll wait then because I was on, I was getting better money off your man, I said I won't do an apprenticeship now, I'm going to wait a couple of months, I was getting really good money, I ended up waiting and I was on good money then and I didn't really want to go back ... I was out of work then until about four or five months ago then. (Garry, 22, dropped out of LCA, employed)

Derek continued working for his employer from his LCA work experience when he finished school. However, it was only after a year and a

half when he found out that his employer had not registered him with FÁS. He also felt it was too late to start an apprenticeship and left this employment:

I was there a year and a half but we had a falling out then because they told me that I wasn't going to FÁS and they were paying me bad wages...I thought I was doing an apprenticeship...and one day I went down there and said why aren't I getting my FÁS papers?

So you obviously left.

Yeah.

And were you getting much training then in that year and a half, a year and half's a long time?

I was up there, the main fella up there, he used to do nothing, he'd sit down with a newspaper all day, I was doing all the body work, spray painting, everything...I had an argument, myself and the foreman down there ... [I said] this is my last day.

Shocking.

And they didn't pay my last week's wages either. (Derek, 21, completed LCA, employed)

Since then Derek has been working on and off for his brother and trying to find whatever work he can:

Okay, so how did you pick yourself up from that then?

Oh I was in a bad mood for a long time ... was plumbing for a while with my brother ...I was doing a few jobs here and there and at the same time I was panel beating myself ... coming and going.

Were you thinking at that stage, I'm not going to start another apprenticeship or anything?

Yeah, I said listen I'm too far gone, I'm too, I've, I'm too far gone, I'm out too long now to be starting apprenticeships.

So what did you do?

Was plumbing for a while, going in and out of different jobs. (Derek, 21, completed LCA, employed)

8.5 Conclusions

Analysis of School Leavers' Survey data shows that young people leaving school following completion of the LCA programme have the highest level of participation in PLC courses. Females outnumber their male counterparts in their level of entry into PLC courses which largely reflects the gendered nature of courses in the PLC sector. Taking account of progression to Higher Education, PLCs and other post-school education opportunities allows us to provide a fuller comparison of the experiences of LCA leavers with other leaver groups. Reflecting the entry requirements of many Higher Education courses, young people leaving school with relatively high performance levels in the LCE/LCVP emerge with much higher levels of post-school educational progression. School leavers completing the LCA programme do not differ from either early school leavers or lower performing LCE/LCVP groups in their progression patterns. It is clear that the main cut-off in accessing post-school (higher) education opportunities is moderately high performance in the LCE/LCVP examination.

9. DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The practice of tracking (placing young people in different tracks or programmes), within the school system has been the subject of much research and policy debate internationally. Commentators in favour of tracking and curriculum differentiation have drawn on human capital theory to highlight the way in which programmes that offer access to vocational learning provide a safety-net for less academic young people by enhancing their skills and employability (Becker, 1975; Blossfeld, 1992; Shavit and Muller, 2000). In contrast, other commentators view tracking as a mechanism that leads to social reproduction; in other words, tracking increases the degree of educational inequality since working-class young people are diverted into programmes which more often than not lead to less skilled jobs (Gamoran and Mare, 1989; Iannelli, 1997; Iannelli and Raffe, 2007).

Our research looks at how one form of tracking, the distinction between the LCA and other Leaving Certificate programmes, shapes student experiences and outcomes. The findings indicate that the LCA programme serves as a 'safety-net' for many young people while at the same time facilitating social differentiation in student pathways. From a human capital perspective, this research has shown how the LCA programme appears to enhance students' chances of entering the labour market when they leave school. In addition, it appears to act as a 'safety-net' for some students at risk of dropping out by prolonging their time in school after junior cycle and preventing them from leaving school early. The programme also appears to re-engage many students in schoolwork through its small class sizes and student-centred teaching methods.

Theories of social reproduction can also be explored in looking at the LCA. By examining the social profile of LCA entrants, it is evident that the programme disproportionately attracts students from working-class backgrounds. There is evidence that some students are not challenged by the LCA curriculum, are restricted in terms of curriculum choice, and their qualification limits them in accessing third-level education. In terms of their labour market outcomes, LCA leavers tend to enter more vulnerable occupational sectors and are at greater risk of unemployment in the immediate post-school period compared with other Leaving Certificate groups. Thus, taking part in LCA may serve to limit the post-school education and employment opportunities of working-class students in particular. With these issues in mind, this chapter aims to address the role of the LCA as a 'diversion' or 'safety net' for young people and the implications of the findings of this research for policy.

Divided into three main sections, this chapter first provides a summary of the key findings of this study addressing each of the research questions set out in Section 1.5. We then briefly examine the economic situation today for LCA leavers. The third section discusses the key policy implications of this research for the nature and context of the LCA programme.

9.1 Summary of the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme

9.1.1 OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAMME OVER TIME

Chapter 1 outlined how the traditional focus of school-based vocational programmes on preparing students for entry-level jobs after second-level education is now giving way to a greater emphasis on both vocational and academic preparation, and preparing students for a wider range of career choices. This can be seen in the percentage of senior cycle examination candidates taking the LCA which has steadily increased between 1997 and 2004 from 1.5 per cent to 7.5 per cent respectively; since 2005 the share of candidates presenting for examination has remained constant at about 7 per cent.

9.1.2 WHAT SCHOOLS PROVIDE LCA?

While the programme is provided in very different types of schools, provision varies significantly by school sector: over 70 per cent of community/comprehensive schools provide the LCA programme compared to over 40 per cent of vocational schools and under 30 per cent of voluntary secondary schools. Furthermore, growth in the provision of the programme over the years since its introduction has been largest in the community/comprehensive sector. Overall, 40 per cent of all schools provide the LCA programme as part of the senior cycle curriculum, meaning that access to the programme is largely dependent on the type of school that students attend.

LCA provision varies not only by school sector but by other school characteristics. Generally, larger schools, schools with disadvantaged (DEIS) status and English medium schools are more likely to provide the LCA programme. There is also evidence to suggest that schools with a higher proportion of literacy problems among the student intake are more likely to provide the programme.

Schools also vary considerably in terms of the level of take-up of the programme. Among schools providing LCA, the proportion of students taking the programme varies significantly, with the average being 23 per cent of the senior cycle cohort. High take-up schools (schools that have 26 per cent or higher of the senior cycle cohort entering the programme) tend to be vocational schools and DEIS schools as well as schools in Dublin, most likely reflecting the concentration of disadvantage in these schools. Smaller schools are less likely to provide LCA but, when they do so, are more likely to have a higher take-up, reflecting the constraints of school size on providing the programme for a small percentage of the cohort.

In sum, it would appear that the provision of LCA is related to the perceived 'suitability' of the programme for a school's student intake. School policy also plays a part since many schools catering for more disadvantaged populations do not provide LCA and broader policy

tensions exist regarding whether all students should have access to the programme rather than only the most disadvantaged students.

9.1.3 PROFILE OF LCA STUDENTS

While LCA students represent young people from all social class backgrounds, Chapter 3 highlighted clear social class inequalities in take-up. International research highlighted how self-selection into vocational tracks is affected, directly or indirectly, by family background (Brunello and Checchi, 2007, p. 784). This study found that less than 5 per cent of students from higher professional, farming or non-manual groups take LCA compared to 10 per cent of the skilled manual group and almost 20 per cent of the non-employed or semi/unskilled manual group. This pattern was also evident in the sample of qualitative respondents. When students were from a higher social class background, there was some evidence of the presence of a learning disability. The programme also tends to attract students from working-class families whose siblings also have low levels of education.

As well as social background, LCA take up is strongly related to reading and mathematical ability on entry into the first year of second-level education. While participation is found among students from a range of initial ability levels, almost one-fifth of those from the lowest quintile go on to LCA in senior cycle compared to less than 1 per cent from the middle/highest quintile. Reading ability is more highly predictive of taking LCA than maths ability, most likely reflecting the strong literacy basis of most second-level subjects.

LCA take-up is also strongly related to ability grouping during junior cycle. Over four in ten of those in the lower stream classes go on to LCA compared to one in ten of those in middle stream classes. This was particularly evident in the qualitative interviews with young people, as many had been streamed into the lower classes in junior cycle. It may be, therefore, that, at least in some school contexts, tracking into LCA operates in effect as a further form of streaming.

What is particularly striking from the earlier sections of the report is that LCA students are quite different from LCE and LCVP students before reaching senior cycle. As well as the differences in maths and reading ability and in streaming practices, LCA students were already more likely to indicate an intention to leave school before entering the programme, to have lower occupational aspirations in junior cycle and to have spent less time on homework in junior cycle. The existence of these pre-existing differences is important in exploring the potential impact of the programme, but more importantly points to substantial differentiation among students emerging at junior cycle level.

The study findings indicate many different pathways into LCA, with the programme catering for different groups of students, including:

- Those who struggle with schoolwork at junior cycle and experience difficulties before entry into the programme;
- Those who experience behavioural problems at junior cycle level;
- Those who wish to enter the labour force (particularly males);

- Those who have special needs or learning difficulties;
- Those who felt they were misdirected by the school into entering LCA.

While there are significant differences in the background and prior experiences of LCA and LCE/LCVP students, it is worth noting the extent of overlap between the two groups. There is no one characteristic found among LCA students that is not found among LCE and LCVP students.

The reasons for entering LCA were examined using both qualitative and quantitative data which yielded similar results. Again, a broad typology was derived based on the reasons for entering the programme which included the following categories:

- Students who wanted to take more practical subjects;
- Students who felt they were 'unable' for the LCE programme;
- Students who exercised choice without parental involvement;
- Students who were encouraged to pursue the programme by their teacher and/or school;
- Students who were influenced by their peers.

This typology highlights the way in which motivations for pursuing the LCA vary across students. The LCA programme would appear to target the groups of students at which it was initially directed: those who have experienced difficulties with their schoolwork, those who are at risk of early school leaving, those who have disengaged academically and those who have had more negative experiences of school (in terms of misbehaviour and negative interaction with teachers). However, it is again important to note that while all of these risk factors enhance the likelihood of entering LCA, the majority of students in these same categories, take the other Leaving Certificate programmes.

9.1.4 CURRICULUM AND LEARNING

Study respondents who had participated in LCA were generally positive about the content of the programme and the teaching methods used. Our findings indicate that LCA offers a greater emphasis on active teaching and learning methodologies, especially group work and project work, than the LCE and LCVP programmes. Furthermore, smaller class sizes meant that many of our respondents reported more individual attention and support from their teachers. There is also evidence to suggest that these teaching and learning methodologies go some way in re-engaging people with learning and improving attitudes to education. Modular credit accumulation was viewed to be a particularly positive aspect of the programme, giving young people greater feedback on their progress and reducing the stress associated with a terminal examination. However, some young people criticised the fact that they did not have access to certain subject areas and there appeared to be a strong degree of gender differentiation in the provision and take-up of vocational specialism courses. In addition, tension exists in relation to the challenge that LCA schoolwork offers. For some students, finding schoolwork easier in LCA than previously in junior cycle resulted in improved self-confidence and engagement with learning. However, others felt insufficiently challenged by the coursework and expressed surprise at the gap in standards between the LCA and other

Leaving Certificate programmes. Maths and English, in particular, attracted comment, with some respondents characterising them as ‘babyish’ and overly repetitive of junior cycle material.

Findings also highlight that LCA students describe negative perceptions of the LCA among other Leaving Certificate students and, in some cases, teachers. Negative labelling and name-calling were reported by some of those interviewed in addition to feelings of segregation through physical separation from the LCE/LCVP classes and non-inclusion in all-school events such as sports days. The qualitative interviews showed that some LCA students were frustrated by the lack of awareness of LCA amongst their family, friends and society in general.

9.1.5 WORK EXPERIENCE

Among LCA students, work experience is perceived to be a positive element of the LCA curriculum. The uptake of LCA work experience is high and LCA students generally felt positive about their work placement. However, it is clear that a lack of financial reward is often seen as a disincentive for some students, particularly males. As with the vocational specialism courses, a strong degree of gender differentiation is evident in the types of work experience placements engaged in by male and female LCA students. It would seem, therefore, that LCA relies heavily on certain sectors and an over-reliance on the construction sector was particularly evident among males.

The effectiveness of the programme in providing specific workplace skills was raised in Tuohy’s (2002) research. In this study, it was clear from the interviews that many students had the ability to reflect on the tasks carried out and the nature of the skills acquired (if any). Some young adults could identify how useful the work placements were in terms of generic skills, such as communication skills, team-working and increased confidence, but perceived less focus on specific vocational or problem-solving skills.

The role of work experience in career decision making differed according to whether career aspirations were in place before the work experience placement. Some students had a clear idea about what occupation they wanted to pursue after leaving school and many of these students used the LCA work experience to sample that occupation. Other students had a vague idea about what they wanted to do and found the work experience useful in helping them make a decision later on. However, many of the students we spoke to, particularly the young women, had no clear idea about what they wanted to do after school (a stark contrast to high achieving females pursuing the LCE). These students tended to rely more on the work experience component in framing career aspirations and because they knew less about the occupation from the onset, they often found out too late that access to further education was hindered because of the restrictions of the LCA. The latter issue was a more general problem for many of the LCA students we interviewed.

The major difficulty that LCA students face in terms of their future options is knowledge relating to the courses and colleges that accept LCA as an entry requirement. Furthermore, it was not clear among students whether a pass LCA would gain entry to similar courses as a distinction LCA. While some of our respondents indicated that their guidance teachers

had offered them assistance, it was clear that they still lacked this important knowledge regarding their options. In fact, the lack of transparent post-school pathways for LCA students proved to be a disincentive for some LCA students to pursue further education/training after they left school, and may contribute to the higher unemployment risk among this group.

9.1.6 SCHOOL DROP-OUT

There is little available information on the proportion of LCA students who leave the programme before completion. Using a variety of data sources, we estimate that the drop-out rate is in the region of 25 to 37 per cent. This is a substantially higher rate than that for either the LCE or the LCVP, as would be expected given the LCA programme explicitly targets those at risk of early school leaving. Indeed, a number of the study respondents indicated the positive difference LCA made to their staying in school. Early leavers from the programme tend to display much more negative attitudes to their teachers than those who complete LCA, feeling that their teachers did not care about them, and were less likely to report that their teachers helped them and listened to their views. It may be that LCA will only retain students in school if it is underpinned by a positive school climate more generally. Furthermore, student disengagement with school often dates back to their experiences at junior cycle (or even earlier).

9.1.7 POST-SCHOOL OUTCOMES

This study provides the first systematic assessment of the post-school outcomes of LCA students. The process of comparing outcomes among LCA students with those of other young people is complex. If we assume that LCA students would otherwise have left the school system, we should compare them with Junior Certificate leavers. However, if we judge that (some of these) LCA students would otherwise have achieved low grades in the LCE/LCVP, we should compare them with low-performing LCE/LCVP students. For the purpose of this study, we compare the labour market outcomes of LCA leavers with a range of other groups, including early leavers and other Leaving Certificate groups across a variety of grade levels.

In relation to labour market outcomes, we examined LCA leavers, relative to other Leaving Certificate and early leaver groups, by looking at three main areas; their status one year after leaving school, their risk of unemployment, and the industrial and occupational sectors they enter in the labour market. It appears that, compared to other Leaving Certificate and early leaving groups, a large proportion of LCA leavers are situated in the labour market one year after leaving school. However, although the LCA is intended to prepare students for progression to the labour market *and* further education, they are less likely than any other school leavers to be in full-time education and training one year after leaving school. Where LCA leavers take part in further education and training, the patterns are highly gendered; young men predominantly enter State-sponsored training programmes (including apprenticeship) while females significantly outnumber males in PLC participation.

When looking at unemployment, our findings indicate that LCA labour market entrants are at greater risk in the immediate post-school period compared with LCE/LCVP labour market entrants, regardless of the latter's examination performance. However, when they obtain a job, LCA

students are similar to the lowest performing LCE/LCVP group in the industrial and occupational sectors they enter. Significant gender differences exist amongst the LCA group, with the majority of males employed in industry and females predominantly working in the distribution sector. Similarly, when looking at occupational sector, patterns differ strongly for males and females; with over 60 per cent of males entering skilled or semi-skilled manual employment and over two-thirds of female leavers employed in the services sector. These findings are notable considering the exceptional economic circumstances which the surveys span, and the current difficulties facing particular sectors.

9.2 The Situation Today

The report provides a valuable insight into the post-school transitions of young people who participated in the LCA programme. In particular, the analyses points to the channelling of LCA participants into the labour market upon leaving school, highlighting relatively low levels of progression to post-school education and training. Where such transitions are made, they are highly gendered and confined to non-third level settings. Among labour market entrants, it is clear that difficulties are encountered in making a smooth transition to the labour market, and labour market entrants are confined to distinct sectors of the labour market. The 'post-school pathways' 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 who left school in 2004, examining their experiences up to the middle 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.

It should also be noted that recent budgetary changes have meant that supports for schools offering the LCA programme have been curtailed (see Chapter 1). Recent research (Smyth and McCoy, 2009) suggests that these changes are likely to impact on the capacity of schools to offer the LCA programme. At the time of writing (November 2009), the Renewed Programme for Government had signalled the reintroduction of LCA capitation grants as per September 2008. However, it remains too soon to gain any understanding of potential changes in provision and take-up of LCA.

9.3 Implications for Policy

The findings outlined above point to the need for further discussion about the LCA programme and its role in senior cycle generally. This section outlines key policy questions which have been identified in this study. The discussion centres on two sets of issues: first, the relationship between the LCA programme and other parts of the second-level system; and second, issues arising in relation to the content and outcomes of the LCA programme.

9.3.1 THE LCA PROGRAMME IN CONTEXT

Findings from the study raise a number of issues around the nature of LCA as an educationally distinct or ring-fenced programme and its relationship with other parts of the second-level system. In the remainder of this section, we look at how LCA entry is influenced by junior cycle experiences, at the unintended consequences of providing a ring-fenced programme for social inequality, at the issue of ring-fencing as opposed to flexibility, and at what lessons can be learnt from the LCA experience for other educational programmes.

9.3.2 HOW IMPORTANT ARE STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN JUNIOR CYCLE TO ENTRY INTO LCA?

This study highlights how negative school experiences during junior cycle can influence the decision to enter the LCA programme. LCA entrants are disproportionately those who have struggled with their schoolwork during junior cycle, who have experienced negative interaction with teachers, and who have been allocated to lower stream classes. Our findings are, therefore, consistent with previous research on student disengagement in the Irish educational system. Student experiences at junior cycle have emerged as key in shaping young people's subsequent engagement with school life (Smyth *et al.*, 2007). School climate has a crucial influence on student disengagement, with students in some school contexts being caught up in a cycle of 'being given out to' by their teachers and 'acting out' in response. Their resulting disengagement manifests itself in academic underperformance (Smyth *et al.*, 2007) and, for many, a gradual withdrawal from schooling (Byrne and Smyth, forthcoming). The approach to teaching and learning at junior cycle level is also found to set the tone for senior cycle experiences. More active teaching methodologies tend to foster student engagement, while differentiated teaching approaches have the potential to avoid the significant level of student dissatisfaction with the pace of instruction evident in junior cycle classrooms (Smyth *et al.*, 2006; 2007).

Entry processes into LCA must therefore be seen in the context of student experiences at junior cycle. The necessity for a differentiated programme at senior cycle may, perhaps, be lessened if these issues are tackled in a more appropriate manner at an earlier stage in junior cycle.

9.3.3 DOES THE LCA REPRODUCE SOCIAL INEQUALITIES OR PROVIDE A 'SAFETY NET' FOR STUDENTS AT RISK?

International research has indicated that the provision of different pathways or tracks within the educational system can often have unintended consequences (Shavit, 1990; Shavit and Muller, 2000; Hallinan, 2007). Thus, programmes which are intended to assist disadvantaged young people may, in fact, contribute to their exclusion. The findings of this

research suggest that the ‘ring-fenced’ nature of the LCA programme may facilitate such social reproduction. This research shows that disadvantaged schools are eight times more likely to have high take-up of LCA than other schools. Within schools, findings demonstrate that the option of a differentiated curriculum at senior cycle can create a group of LCA students who are predominantly from working-class backgrounds, from lower streamed classes, have low occupational and educational expectations, and have experienced disengagement from school in junior cycle. The way in which LCA is provided in schools means that students often feel excluded from other Leaving Certificate groups and in some cases are segregated from the main student body. Exclusion continues in young peoples’ post-school years where access to third-level education is limited by having an LCA qualification. In line with international research on curriculum differentiation (Gamoran, 1987; Oakes 1985), findings show that the attainment gap between LCA and LCE/LCVP students is the result of the LCA shaping student post-school outcomes by encouraging entry into specific industrial sectors of the labour market and in some cases preventing and limiting access to further education (Shavit and Muller, 2000). 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.

Side by side with patterns of social differentiation, our research shows that the LCA can exert a positive impact on preventing early school leaving by re-engaging young people with school, thus acting as a safety-net for certain groups of young people.

9.3.4 HOW RIGID SHOULD THE BOUNDARIES BE BETWEEN LCA AND OTHER LEAVING CERTIFICATE PROGRAMMES?

Findings show a lack of flexibility in pathways between LCA and LCE/LCVP; students who changed their minds and wished to transfer from LCA to LCE/LCVP in the early stage of the school year appeared unable to do so. Moreover, this study found that some LCA students experienced segregation from other Leaving Certificate groups by being either physically separate within the school, or by simply not being included in non-curricular or whole school activities.

LCA students were much less likely than other Leaving Certificate students to have a choice of subjects. In addition, some students expressed the view that they would have liked the option to take some LCE subjects in addition to LCA modules. Many young people alluded to having the option of a personalised or more flexible Leaving Certificate. Greater flexibility in combining different subjects and modules from the LCE, LCVP and LCA programmes would be consistent with the greater emphasis internationally on personalised learning (see Sebba *et al.*, 2007 on the British context). This approach places the student at the centre, allowing young people to combine different learning experiences at a pace which suits their needs, interests and abilities. Allowing students to choose different components of the LCA and the LCE/LCVP would allow them to manage their own Leaving Certificate experience. Given the right supports, this flexibility would increase interaction between Leaving Certificate groups and allow LCA students to continue with subjects they had enjoyed in junior cycle.

9.3.5 WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE LCA TEACHING APPROACH?

The discussion so far has focused on implications of the ring-fenced nature of the LCA programme for young people's learning experiences. It is important to note that the findings also indicate that educational provision at junior and senior cycle levels has much to learn from the experience of the LCA programme. This study highlights a number of positive aspects of the LCA programme experience, and provides an insight into how all students' experience of learning can be improved. Findings show how young people are generally positive about the teaching methods used in the programme, with many stressing that it re-engaged them in the school process. Students were positive, in particular, about the small class sizes but also responded positively to active teaching methods, an interactive learning environment and the emphasis on credit accumulation over time.

On this note, increased confidence, increased self-esteem and a more positive perception of school tended to characterise young people who had come through the LCA programme. The emphasis on active learning methods and modular credit accumulation within the programme appears to have re-engaged students with school in light of their more negative experiences at junior cycle; and in some cases appears to have prevented them from leaving school altogether. This raises important questions regarding the role of active teaching methods in both junior and senior cycle education and whether the Junior Certificate and LCE/LCVP programmes could benefit from adopting these approaches.

Students also appeared to enjoy the work experience component of LCA and this aspect of the programme was deemed to improve generic work skills, knowledge of particular occupations and provide contact with future employers. This was particularly the case amongst the male LCA leavers who sought contact with employers to take them on as apprentices. Again this raises a more general issue concerning whether some elements of workplace-based learning should be available to young people across a range of programmes.

9.3.6 ISSUES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LCA PROGRAMME

The previous subsection focused on the place of LCA in the wider educational context. The study findings also raised a number of specific issues which could contribute to the future development of the LCA programme. Here, we focus on entry processes into LCA, the content of the programme, and its recognition in accessing employment and post-school education/training.

9.3.7 SHOULD ENTRY INTO LCA BE DETERMINED?

Our findings point to considerable variation across schools in the ways in which students are selected into the programme. The recruitment policy for LCA appears to differ across schools, and points to varying levels of parental involvement in students' decision making process. This finding may be symptomatic of a lack of clear definition and objectives of the LCA programme which result in its being interpreted differently by schools, students and parents. Analysis of the types of students who take LCA

highlights varied pathways and reasons for entering the programme. This may suggest that the LCA is catering for students for whom it was not originally intended (those at risk of early school leaving or underachieving).

The importance of guidance counselling and adequate information about the LCA programme for junior cycle students was evident from this study. Students felt there was a lack of transparency in the information provided about the structure of the programme in terms of curriculum, assessment, work experience and in particular accreditation. This issue could easily be resolved at school level where students could be made sufficiently aware of the differences between LCA and LCE/LCVP, and the potential limitations of the LCA qualification for access to further education and employment.

9.3.8 WHAT ASPECTS OF LCA LEARNING CONTENT DO NOT FOSTER STUDENT POTENTIAL?

It was clear from our findings that some aspects of LCA do not foster student potential to a sufficient degree. Some young people reported being insufficiently challenged by the coursework in LCA, specifically in Maths and English, which they described as ‘babyish’ or like ‘Junior Certificate subjects’. There appears to be an excessive gap in standards between LCA and the other Leaving Certificate programmes, which has implications not only for school-based experiences but also for transitions to post-school education or training programmes.

Further debate is also needed on the gendered nature of the LCA curriculum and its continued inclusion of traditionally ‘female’ vocational subjects (such as Childcare, Hair and Beauty) and ‘male’ oriented modules (such as Construction and Engineering). The study shows that LCA students’ subject choices tend to influence the sectors in which students carry out their work experience; thus, females tend to get placements in the wholesale/retail and personal service industries and males often enter the construction industry. This is particularly relevant now in light of current economic trends where sectors, such as construction, are the most vulnerable. These issues raise important questions about the content of the LCA curriculum and its ability to motivate and engage this group of young people with gender neutral subjects which would provide them with a wider set of workplace and life skills. This approach should be underpinned by supporting students to participate in a wider range of work placements across industrial sectors.

9.3.9 HOW CAN THE PROFILE, AWARENESS AND RECOGNITION OF LCA BE IMPROVED?

Issues around public perception and profile of the LCA, its awareness amongst employers, and its recognition in second- and third-level education have emerged from this study. Many young people expressed frustration at the stigma associated with the LCA and felt it was the result of a lack of awareness and interaction with other Leaving Certificate groups. This raises the important question of how potential stigma, segregation and negative perceptions of the programme can be reduced at school and system level. In addition, some young people felt that employers were not sufficiently aware of the LCA or did not recognise the qualification or grade they had attained. As mentioned above, in some

instances students themselves did not realise the limitations of the LCA qualification in accessing third-level education and expressed disappointment at this lack of clarity and its lack of recognition by third-level institutions.

LCA profile, awareness and recognition raise the important issue of the place of the programme within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Currently, Leaving Certificate programmes (including LCA) span levels 4 and 5 of the Framework, but it is evident from the study findings that LCA leavers have quite different progression pathways to LCE/LCVP leavers. There is a case perhaps for greater transparency in the comparability of LCA with the other Leaving Certificate programmes. For example, allowing comparisons between an LCA distinction grade with a specified number of foundation or ordinary level LCE/LCVP grades would allow students, employers and the public to compare and contrast the level and standards of the Leaving Certificate programmes, and thus improve overall recognition of the programme, allowing for clearer progression routes.

9.3.10 HOW CAN LCA IMPACT POSITIVELY ON SCHOOL LEAVERS' LABOUR MARKET OPTIONS?

This study highlights variation in labour market outcomes among LCA school leavers relative to early school leavers and other Leaving Certificate school leavers. Our findings indicate that LCA leavers have higher levels of participation in the labour market one year after leaving school, compared with other Leaving Certificate groups, but labour market entrants who have taken LCA have a greater risk of unemployment than their LCE/LCVP counterparts during the immediate post-school period. In the context of the current economic downturn, this study highlights the occupational sectors which LCA leavers enter compared to other school leavers. Findings show a relatively large proportion of males enter the construction sector and females tend to find work in the wholesale/retail and personal services industries. The study findings suggest that a greater variety in module content areas coupled with improved awareness among employers of the LCA qualification could serve to open up other employment opportunities for LCA leavers, especially in the currently changing labour market.

9.3.11 HOW CAN ACCESS TO POST-SCHOOL EDUCATION BE IMPROVED FOR LCA SCHOOL LEAVERS?

This research study indicates that LCA leavers are less likely to access any kind of post-school education relative to low performing LCE/LCVP school leavers, and are only marginally more likely to do so than those who left school after the Junior Certificate. This raises important policy questions regarding barriers to progression for LCA students and how these obstacles can be overcome.

Findings show a strong tendency for females to opt for PLC courses and males for State training programmes, perhaps reflecting the gendered nature of courses available in the PLC sector in addition to the influence of LCA coursework and work placements taken by students. This again raises the issue of course content but also highlights the importance of improved

guidance provision in LCA and the role it can play in the choice process for students wishing to enter further education and training.

Issues around grading and accreditation emerged as significant obstacles for LCA students wishing to enter post-school education, particularly third-level courses. There is a need for discussion about the lack of recognition of the LCA qualification for third-level entry and its exclusion from the CAO points system used for LCE/LCVP entrants. As discussed above, the introduction of a personalised Leaving Certificate with the option of taking a number of LCE/LCVP subjects would enable students to gain CAO points which could then be added to points awarded for LCA subjects/modules, in a system similar to that awarded link subjects in the LCVP.

9.4 Conclusions

This research has shown that a discussion of the LCA cannot be carried out in isolation but must incorporate the wider educational context in which the programme operates. The policy implications outlined above raise important questions about the role of the LCA in relation to junior and senior cycle more generally. Our findings show how students' negative academic and school experiences during junior cycle determine their entry into the LCA and highlight how the option of a differentiated curriculum at senior cycle attracts a distinct social profile of students who are predominantly working class. 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. However, it is clear that both 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.

To summarise how these broader issues might be addressed, we have identified ways in which the LCA programme can be improved and developed in the future. Defining clear and transparent objectives for the LCA could help to resolve some of the problems associated with student entry into the programme and the varying interpretations of LCA by schools, parents and students. An understanding of who the LCA is intended for and its learning outcomes could be aided by improving the provision of guidance counselling in junior cycle when students are considering their senior cycle options. Introducing a more personalised form of learning with greater flexibility for students would address the issues around lack of challenge in the LCA curriculum expressed by students in this study. Providing students with the option of choosing LCE/LCVP subjects and earning CAO points as part of their qualification would increase the level of challenge for some students. In addition, if traditional gendered vocational subjects were replaced with, or augmented by, more engaging gender neutral subjects, such as Entrepreneurship Studies or Sustainable Development, students may, in turn, be exposed to a broader range of work experience placements. Increasing the challenge and widening the scope of the curriculum would also impact positively on students' educational and labour market opportunities post-school by broadening the sectors they enter. Greater clarity about where the LCA is positioned within the National Framework of Qualifications could help to

address the problems associated with its profile and increase awareness of the programme among employers, educational institutions and the public and media more generally. Increased recognition would also have a knock-on effect of reducing the apparent stigma and negative labelling associated with the LCA as experienced by young people in this study. In many ways, all of these issues are interrelated and addressing even one of these issues would have positive implications for other areas of the programme. While the findings show how junior and senior cycle programmes can learn from the positive teaching and learning aspects of the LCA programme, this report provides a unique opportunity to identify ways in which curricular and school level issues can be modified and improved.

9.5 Potential for Future Research

This study has provided a unique insight into the nature of student experiences of the LCA programme and the consequences for young people's life after school. The study indicates a number of areas which could usefully form the basis for further research and so enhance future policy development. Such research could address a number of issues raised in this report such as: the impact of the economic climate on LCA participation; the role of the school in LCA provision and take-up, employer engagement in LCA work experience; factors shaping regional differentiation in the take-up of LCA; and parent, guidance counsellor and teacher perspectives of the LCA programme.

Data used in this report cover a time period of economic boom in the Irish economy. Future work could offer additional analysis on how the current downturn in the Irish economy has impacted on and will impact on LCA enrolment, work experience placements and access to apprenticeships in badly affected sectors such as construction.

The dynamics of programme provision and take-up is another research area that merits further attention. An understanding of how schools decide to apply for approval to provide LCA, the influence of student characteristics on this decision and the role of LCA in Special Schools and Youthreach Centres are significant. The extent to which this is related to school expansion would provide greater insight into differences in the provision and take-up of LCA across school types and may also explain regional differentiation in take-up of the LCA.

This study highlighted marked regional differences between Dublin and the rest of the country in the take-up of LCA within schools. Further investigation into rural and urban take-up rates and a more detailed investigation into the operation of the LCA in Dublin schools may explain some of these differences.

Although the study touched on young people's experiences of employer perceptions of LCA, a more comprehensive and detailed study that focused in greater detail on employer attitudes to LCA work experience and recognition of the LCA qualification would provide an insight into how best to improve this process with mutual benefit for students and employers.

Finally, this study focused primarily on student perceptions and opinion of the LCA. A study that analysed the views of parents, teachers and guidance counsellors would allow for a valuable comparison with the

perspectives of LCA students and help in understanding the current use of the programme by schools and the level of awareness of LCA among parents.

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APPENDIX 1

Organisation of the LCA

The LCA covers a two-year span, consisting of four half-year sessions, and achievement is credited in each of these sessions. The programme has always been structured around three modules: Vocational Preparation, Vocational Education and General Education. While LC and LCVP students take individual subjects, often from subject groupings, LCA students take a course and each course consists of a number of modules. A module represents half a year's work and is designed to take a minimum of 30 hours to complete.

The three modules of the LCA are outlined in Table 1.1 below. Vocational preparation aims to prepare students for adult and working life through a range of courses and modules, including English and communication, guidance, job-search, work experience, enterprise, community work, and work and living, and work experience is a central component of this. Within the vocational education module, all students take a course in mathematical application and an introductory course to information and communication technology. Two specialist courses are chosen from the career-related areas in Table 1.1 below. The general education module includes courses in arts education and languages plus a choice of courses.

Assessment of LCA

While assessment of the LCE/LCVP programmes is largely based on academic performance, assessment of LCA takes place under three headings; (1) satisfactory completion of modules (31 per cent), (2) performance in student tasks (35 per cent), (3) performance in final examinations (34 per cent). Credits² or marks are then awarded for each of the three assessment areas. At the end of a 'session' or half a year, a student is credited on satisfactory completion of the appropriate module; however, attendance must have been maintained at 90 per cent throughout the session. According to Departmental guidelines, *...this method of assessment is specifically designed to increase students' motivation and to ensure their participation in the modules on an on-going basis.*

The student task is a unique feature of the LCA, and aims to be *...a practical activity which provides students with the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills acquired through the various courses* (DES, 2000, p.9). In relation to student tasks, each student is required to complete seven student tasks over the two years. Tasks are assessed at the end of each session by external examiners appointed by the Department of Education and Science. For six of the seven tasks, this assessment includes an individual student interview. These

² A maximum of 200 credits can be accumulated over the two years under the three headings of satisfactory completion of modules, student tasks, and final examination.

tasks may be in a variety of formats – written, audio, video, artifact etc. Each student is also required to produce a report on the process of completing the task. As with the LC and the LCVP, the LCA final examinations are organised by the State Examinations Commission as part of the timetable for Junior and Leaving Certificate Examinations, and include written, oral and practical components. Students who successfully complete the programme will receive a Leaving Certificate from the Department of Education and Science. All credits are recorded on the LCA parchment. Students who do not complete the programme receive a Record of Experience.

In design and structure, the LCA is pedagogically radically different to other programmes on offer in senior cycle. The pathways out of LCA are also different to other programmes at senior cycle. Direct access to third-level education through the CAO system is not possible immediately upon completion of the LCA, but students can access third-level via post-secondary level education, particularly PLC courses at NCVA level 2. After obtaining a FETAC Level 2 award on a PLC, it is possible for students to progress to third-level certificate courses in the Institutes of Technology through the Higher Education Links scheme. FÁS apprenticeship courses accept LCA as a qualification for entry to standards-based apprenticeships.

Organisation of the Leaving Certificate Applied

| Vocational Preparation | Vocational Education | General Education | Tasks | Final Examination |
|------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| English and Communication | Active Leisure Studies | Arts Education | General Education | English and Communication |
| Guidance | Agriculture/Horticulture | Gaeilge | Vocational Preparation | Two Vocational Specialisms |
| Job Search | Childcare/Community Care | Modern Languages/Sign Language | Two Vocational Education | Mathematical Applications |
| Work Experience | Craft and Design | Leisure and Recreation | Contemporary Issue | Language |
| Enterprise | Graphics and Construction Studies | Social Education | Practical Achievement | Social Education |
| Community Work | Engineering | Additional Modules | Personal Reflection | |
| | Hair and Beauty | | | |
| | Hotel, Catering and Tourism | | | |
| | Information and Communications Technology | | | |
| | Office Administration and Customer Care Technology | | | |
| Overall Certification | Pass 120-139 credits 60-69 per cent Merit 140-169 credits 70-84 per cent Distinction 170-200 credits 85-100 per cent | | | |

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