NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND MAYNOOTH

Leaving Certificate Applied and Beyond: A School-Based Investigation of the Experiences of Students who have taken the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme.

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Abstract

This study examined the senior cycle experience of LCA students in a second level school. It also investigated how these students progressed in further education and in employment following their graduation from second level education.

The primary objectives of the research were to ascertain to what extent students who pursue the LCA programme are satisfied with their experience and to determine the currency of the LCA qualification.

A group of young adults who have graduated from the LCA programme were surveyed by means of a postal questionnaire. Follow up interviews were conducted with a sub sample of the group. Interviews were also conducted with third level teachers and with employers who work with graduates of the programme.

Areas investigated included:
- Reasons why students choose LCA
- Satisfaction with the Programme offered
- Perception of LCA
- Its value as an educational credential

From the data collected the researcher concludes:

➢ Many students enjoy a high level of satisfaction with the LCA programme in the case-study school and are quite successful in the labour market.

➢ A high percentage of LCA students progress to further education but their progress in third level is very limited.

➢ A low standard of literacy and numeracy in the LCA programme frustrates more able students and is a handicap in third level.

➢ The perception of the programme is problematic for many of the participants. Some believe there is a 'stigma' attached to LCA.

➢ Many employers are unaware of the LCA programme.

A number of recommendations are made in the concluding chapter with a view to enhancing the LCA experience for the participants. Key recommendations include:

➢ The school must be proactive in ensuring that LCA students are granted parity of esteem with students of other Leaving Certificate programmes.

➢ The literary and numeracy elements of LCA must be enhanced if the programme is to offer challenge to the more able students.

➢ Support must be provided for LCA students in third level.

➢ A campaign is needed to inform employers of the LCA programme.

Glossary of Terms

CERT

CERT is the national training body for the tourism and hospitality industries. Courses are provided through the Institutes of Technology and the Tourism College in Killybegs.

FAS

Ireland's National Training and Employment Authority. It promotes job opportunities and training courses for school leavers, postgraduates and professionals.

FETAC

The Further Education and Training Awards Council was set up as a statutory body in 2001 by the Minister for Education and Science. It has responsibility for making awards previously made by the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA).

FETAC Level 2

This is the third step on the NCVA framework of qualifications. It is the qualification granted on completion of a one-year Post Leaving Certificate course. FETAC Level 2 is the minimum entry requirement for a range of higher education institutions.

Leaving Certificate Applied Programme

Popularly known as LCA, this two-year programme was introduced as a ring fenced, alternative Leaving Certificate in 1995.

Leaving Certificate Established

This is the traditional Leaving Certificate offered in second level schools. It is a two-year programme containing a range of distinct subjects. It is assessed in the main through written examination and offers progression to university education.

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

This programme was introduced in 1989 to provide an element of vocational education at Leaving Certificate level.

Post Leaving Certificate Course

Post Leaving Certificate courses were introduced in 1985 to provide general education, vocational training and work experience for young people who had completed second level education, to enhance their prospects of securing employment.

Staff Council

This refers to meetings of the Principal, the Deputy Principal and the entire teaching staff in the case study school.

Transition Year

The Transition Year programme was introduced in 1986. It is a one-year programme, which eases the transition between junior and senior cycle. Transition Year is optional in many schools.

Vocational Preparation Training Programme

This programme, known either as VPTP or VPT 1, was introduced in the mid 1980s as an alternative senior cycle programme. It was introduced as part of a strategy to tackle rising youth unemployment.

List of Abbreviations

The following is a list of abbreviations used in this thesis.

CAAG	Curriculum Awareness Action Group
CORI	Conference of Religious of Ireland
DES	Department of Education and Science
EC	European Community
ECDL	European Community Driving Licence
ESF	European Social Fund
HSCLO	Home School Community Liaison Officer
ICT	Information Communications Technology
IQ	Intelligence Quotient
IT	Institute of Technology
JCSP	Junior Certificate Schools Programme
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCE	Leaving Certificate Established
LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCVA	National Council for Vocational Awards
NESF	National Economic Social Forum
NUI	National University of Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

PLC   Post Leaving Certificate Course

RTC   Regional Technical College

TY   Transition Year

VEC   Vocational Education Committee

VPTP   Vocational Preparation and Training Programme

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Introduction

Purpose of the Research

The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) was introduced nationally in 1995 as an alternative to the Leaving Certificate Established. It is a vocationally orientated course introduced O Donnabhain suggests: "... to correct an imbalance in existing curriculum that was almost entirely in the classical/liberal tradition" (1998: 53). The LCA programme enables the less academic student to acquire certification at Leaving Certificate level. There is ample evidence to show that such qualifications significantly enhance one's prospects of success in the labour market.

> Because of the strong association between education and labour market outcomes, young people in Ireland who do not achieve educational qualifications are disproportionately likely to experience labour market marginalisation in terms of unemployment, insecure jobs and/or low pay.
>
> (Smyth and Hannan, 2000: 125).

A key aim of this study is to investigate how young people who have completed the LCA programme, progress in the labour market.

However the success or otherwise of the programme should not be measured on the basis of educational credentials alone. The White Paper *Charting Our Education Future* reminds us that the talents of all pupils must be recognised and that they should be afforded the opportunity to develop in terms of 'responsibility, self esteem and self knowledge' (Government of Ireland, 1995: 2). Research to date suggests that the programme is successful in encouraging the growth of the individual, the development of self-confidence and self-esteem, and the awakening of intelligences and skills other than the academic (Boldt, 1998; Department of Education and Science (DES) 2000). These appear to be very significant gains and should result in a high

level of participant satisfaction with the LCA programme. This study sets out to investigate if this is the experience of people who have completed the LCA programme in a particular school.

The school, referred to as St. John's Community College for the purposes of this study, introduced LCA in 1996. Following a high drop out of students from the initial cohort, the programme has become well established and is now highly valued by the management and staff. Students achieve very good results with high percentages achieving merits and distinctions annually (Source: school records). However other aspects of success such as participant satisfaction, or progression beyond the programme have not been investigated to date. As a Year Head in the school with responsibility to advise students on their senior cycle options, the researcher believes this information is critical to the decision making process. For this reason this project was undertaken. It aims to examine participant satisfaction with the programme and to investigate their progression beyond it. This is a case study which employs both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Outline of the Chapters

Chapter 1

The opening chapter presents a profile of the case study school. The desire to create an inclusive school responsive to the needs of all learners is discussed. Particular aspects of the school have been developed towards this end. A number of these are discussed including the Year-Head/Tutor system, extra curricular activities and the organisation of class groups on a mixed ability basis. The various curricular

programmes on offer in the college are outlined. The introduction of LCA in 1996 is discussed in detail, as is the structure of the programme.

Chapter 2

A review of the relevant literature is presented in Chapter 2. The LCA programme is set in context through an analysis of the circumstances, which led to its introduction in 1995. Some of the key concerns of the time are discussed. These include the perception of the new programme and the value of the qualification relative to the Leaving Certificate Established. The implications of early school leaving and the importance of educational credentials in Irish society are explored. The inferior status traditionally afforded vocational education is examined, as are the implications for the curriculum, of Gardner's (1983) Theory of Multiple Intelligences. Earlier evaluations of the LCA programme are reviewed.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology. The objectives of the research are stated. Principles of educational research such as selecting research instruments, the importance of objectivity and the need for triangulation are discussed. The reasons for using both quantitative and qualitative methods are outlined.

Chapter 4

Here the findings from both the questionnaires and the interviews are presented. Many of the quantitative findings are displayed graphically for the purpose of clarity. Several quotes from the interviews are included in line with one of the primary concerns of this project – namely to give 'voice' to the students who have lived the

LCA experience. The author believes that these young people are well placed to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the LCA programme.

Chapter 5

In the final chapter conclusions are drawn from the research findings. These are presented with reference to the literature. A number of recommendations are made with a view to enhancing the senior cycle experience of LCA students and also of easing their progression through further education. Further recommendations are forwarded which, if implemented at national level should enhance the value of the LCA qualification in the workplace.

Chapter One

The Case Study School

1.1 Introduction

One of the aims of this study is to examine the senior cycle experience of Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) students in a community college, which offers three senior cycle programmes. These are the Leaving Certificate Applied, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and the Leaving Certificate Established. This chapter describes the research site and pays particular attention to a number of aspects of the college, which have been central to our endeavours to build an inclusive school, which caters for the needs of all the students.

1.2 The Case Study School

The case study school is located in West Dublin. It is a Community College under the auspices of Co. Dublin Vocational Educational Committee (VEC). The school opened in 1982. Today there are 45 teaching staff, including permanent, eligible part-time and part-time staff. The school has one qualified Learning Support teacher, two Guidance Counsellors (one permanent and one part-time), a lay Chaplain and a full time Home School Community Liaison Officer (HSCLO). The current enrolment is 597 students.

The school's catchment area incorporates a middle class area of private housing and a more disadvantaged area of public housing. The majority of the students come from this urban setting, while a small minority come from a rural background. Non-national students have become a significant minority group within the school in the past eight years and now make up approximately 10% of the student body. A further 2% is made up of another minority group, namely Travellers (Source: school registers).

St. John's Community College is administered through a Board of Management under the patronage of Co. Dublin VEC. A Parents' Council was formed when the school first opened and with two brief interludes has been in existence throughout the school's history. Membership of the council is open to all parents. The current council has twenty-one members. A teacher representative sits on the council to liaise between the parents and the staff.

1.3 Ethos

"St. John's Community College was established in 1982 to meet the second level educational needs of the community. We commit ourselves to work for this purpose with dedication and professional expertise" (Cavanagh and O'Connor, 2004). Meeting the diverse needs of a student body coming from a mixed social background has presented the college with a significant challenge. Management and staff have worked hard to ensure that all students, irrespective of background, have been catered for in an inclusive school. Great emphasis has been placed on the fact that as a Community College our purpose is to serve the needs of the local community.

As a non-selective school, in an area of wide ranging social mix this provides many challenges. "Getting the ethos of the school right and bringing new staff to the belief that an inclusive school could be created was a significant challenge in the beginning ..." (Geaney, 1998).

The awareness that each student is entitled to a meaningful and appropriate education was central to the introduction of many new courses. These include Vocational Preparation

Training Programme (VPTP), Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP). The college prides itself on the fact that it has always been open to change and to the introduction of new programmes, which are appropriate to the students' needs. The LCA Programme is one such example.

1.4 Year-Head Tutor System

In the case study school staff have always been mindful of their responsibility to the pastoral needs of the students. With this in mind a year-head/tutor system was established from the outset and has remained in place throughout the school's history. Tutors meet their tutor class twice daily for registration and are timetabled for one tutor class each week. This level of contact ensures that tutors get to know their students very well and they play an important role in the pastoral care of the students. Tutors meet parents annually at parent/tutor meetings. These meetings are highly valued by parents and attendance is regularly close on 100% (Source - school records).

Year-Heads co-ordinate the activities of the year group and liaise closely with class tutors. They organise and plan class outings, tours, special events and more mundane activities such as supervised study. They play a key role in implementing the college code of behaviour. They work closely with the Learning Support Teacher, the JCSP Coordinator, the HSCLO and the Guidance Counsellors to ensure the welfare of all students in their group. "Consistent with the ethos statement ... the role of tutor and year-head spell out the need to be familiar with the students and their needs ..." (Geaney, 1998: 4)

1.5 Extra Curricular Activities

"The college also values the developmental process of human growth through which young people are progressing. Sensitivity to such development informs our approach to curricular and extra curricular activities" (Cavanagh and O'Connor, 2004). Extra curricular activities have always been highly valued in the case study school. Both management and staff recognise the potential of extra curricular activities to reach students who see themselves as marginalized in the school community[1]. Involving such students in extra-curricular activities may provide their first experience of positive interaction with teachers and can give them a feeling of 'membership' within the school community (Wehlage[2], 1989: 118).

The range of extra curricular activities which have been offered in the school include: Gaelic Football, Hurling, Rugby, Soccer, Basketball, Tennis, Cross Country Running, Athletics, Table-Tennis, Outdoor-pursuits (including Canoeing, Kayaking, Wind-Surfing, Orienteering, Hill Walking, Abseiling, Rock Climbing) Computers, Drama, Choir, Model United Nations, Debating and First Aid.

1.6 Curricular Programmes on Offer in St. John's Community College

1.6.1 Junior Certificate Programme

All junior cycle student follow the three year Junior Certificate Programme at the end of which they sit the Junior Certificate Examination. All students take the core subjects of: English, Irish, Mathematics, Science, History, Geography, Civic Social Political Education,

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[1] Smyth (1999) found that students do better academically and are less likely to drop out of school when they are more integrated into the school through pupil council/prefect systems, or informally through extra-curricular activities.

[2] Wehlage (1989) argues that where students have failed to become involved with the school through academic activities it becomes necessary to rely on any other school activity to get the student to engage with the school.

French[1], Social Personal Health Education, Relationships and Sexuality Education, Computers, Religion and Physical Education. Students also choose two option subjects from: Materials Technology (Wood), Metalwork, Business Studies, Art, Home Economics, Technical Graphics and Music. All groups are timetabled for one tutor class each week.

1.6.2 Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP)

JCSP is a Department of Education and Science intervention within Junior Cycle to support students identified as at risk of early school leaving. The programme was introduced to the case study school in 2001 having being launched nationally in 1996. It was introduced to support students who were struggling with the Junior Certificate curriculum.

JCSP students follow the Junior Certificate programme but with a different approach and emphasis. Work is broken down into more manageable blocks and great emphasis is placed on short-term goals and frequent rewards. A team approach is adopted in teaching within JCSP. Assessment is based on a profiling system. On completion of pre-identified blocks of work, statements are completed. These are placed in individual student folders and become part of each student's profile.

First-year students are selected for the JCSP class on the basis of:

- Perceived risk of early school leaving
- The level of support it is envisaged they will require to complete junior cycle
- A formal assessment

A class group is formed (maximum 15 students), prior to Christmas of first year. As English, Irish, Mathematics and French are set on the timetable the JCSP group come together at these

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[1] Students identified as in need of learning support are withdrawn from French class and go to the Learning Support teacher at this time.

times – twelve periods per week. Within this time they pursue the Foundation Level Maths course, Foundation Level Irish (combined with Irish Cultural Studies), Foundation/Ordinary level English and they work on various projects across a range of Junior Certificate subjects. JCSP students do not take French but receive learning support at this time. At all other times the JCSP students attend normal first year classes.

Constant affirmation is central to JCSP and celebration of success is a key element of the programme. In the case study school students are regularly rewarded with special events such as a fun outing or a class party.

On completion of the programme students are presented with:
- A profile, which lists their skills and all the things, they are good at
- A list of goals the student has achieved
- A reference from the school

To date the benefits of JCSP in the school have been identified as:
- ✓ Improved attendance
- ✓ Greater involvement of students in their own learning
- ✓ Improved retention
- ✓ Improved confidence and self-esteem of JCSP students
- ✓ Students displaying a more positive attitude to school (DES, Junior Certificate Schools Programme Evaluation (Internal), 2003).

JCSP was introduced to meet the needs of a group of students who were seen to be struggling with the Junior Certificate curriculum. LCA was introduced at senior cycle for similar

reasons. The first JCSP class, in the case-study school completed the programme in June 2004. Twelve of the fourteen students in the class have now opted for LCA. The approach to teaching and learning employed in JCSP may well encourage students to choose LCA at senior cycle. In the years ahead it is likely that many JCSP students will go on to complete both programmes.

1.6.3 Senior Cycle Options in St. John's Community College

On completion of Junior Certificate students have the following options:
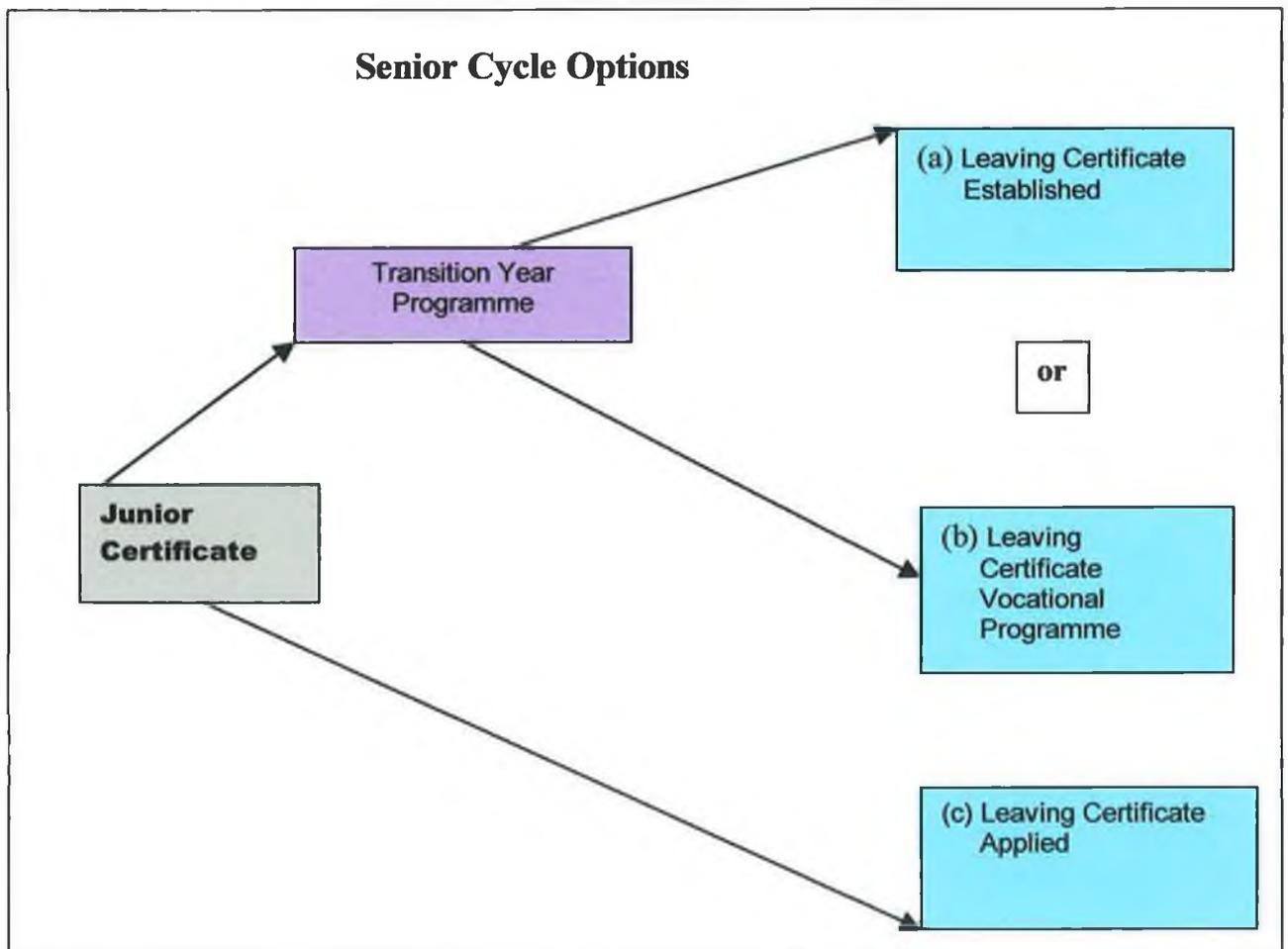
Figure 1.1

As Figure 1.1 demonstrates students may choose either TY or LCA on completion of Junior Certificate. There has been serious debate at staff council as to whether students should complete TY before progressing to LCA. Following consultation with parents it was agreed

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that one of the attractions of LCA is its 2-year duration. If students were required to complete TY before progressing to LCA this could prove a disincentive to students at risk of early leaving. However where individual students wish to apply for LCA on completion of TY they may do so, but completion of TY is not a requirement for LCA students.

1.6.4 Transition Year (TY)

The TY programme was first introduced to the college in 1986 and has continued as a compulsory prerequisite to the Leaving Certificate Established ever since. In TY students take the core subjects of English, Irish, Mathematics and French. They also complete several modules covering a range of subject areas including European Studies, Environmental Studies and Social Studies.

Other significant events include:

(a) Two work experience placements, each of two weeks duration.

(b) A one-week outdoor pursuits trip to an Outdoor Education Centre.

(c) A number of subject based day trips to out of school centres. These are known in the college as 'Significant Learning Days'.

(d) One week of community care.

On completion students proceed to Fifth Year and commence their Leaving Certificate programme. At this point students must choose between Leaving Certificate Established and LCVP.

1.6.5 Leaving Certificate Established

On completion of TY the majority of senior students, (approximately 60%), go on to complete Leaving Certificate Established (Source: school records). This is a two-year programme at the end of which students sit the terminal Leaving Certificate Examination. Normally students take seven examination subjects. The majority of students take English, Irish, Mathematics and four subjects from the following list: French, Geography, History, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Technical Drawing, Construction Studies, Engineering, Business Studies, Economics, Home Economics, Art and Music. Students also take the following non-examination subjects: Physical Education, Religion and Career Guidance.

This programme is seen as a high status programme from which considerable numbers of students progress to third level education. As Quinn (1998) and Madden (1996) note the Leaving Certificate Established is also used by employers for selection in the labour market. As such good Leaving Certificate results can qualify one for some of the more prestigious occupations.

1.6.6 Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP)

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is a vocationally orientated Leaving Certificate which aims to: "... promote the skills and qualities of self-reliance, innovation and enterprise in an integrated programme" (LCVP Action Group, 1999: 5). The programme was introduced nationally in 1989 and a revised programme was introduced in September 1996. LCVP students must take a minimum of five Leaving Certificate subjects. Two subjects must be chosen from one of the Vocational Subject Groupings, as laid down by the DES. They must also take Irish and a course in a Modern European Language. The vocational dimension

of the programme is enhanced through the provision of three Link Modules, which must be taken. These are:

(i)   Preparation for work

(ii)   Work experience

(iii)   Enterprise Education

LCVP students receive the same certificate as the Leaving Certificate Established students but their Certificate also includes a statement of the results of the Link Modules. Points achieved in the Link Modules are recognised by the Institutes of Technology and the Universities for admittance to certificate, diploma and degree courses.

The time tabling of LCVP in the case study school includes two class periods built into the students' timetable. This can be part of an option block or has on occasion been timetabled after school. One class period is provided for students who do not have a continental language. All LCVP students must take one period of work experience (normally during the Easter Holidays). This timetabling arrangement means that the LCVP students are not timetabled as a separate group. For the remainder of their timetable they are in classes with the Leaving Certificate Established students. As such LCVP is undertaken as an extra 'subject' rather than as a distinct programme. This model has been agreed following consultation between management, teachers, parents and students.

1.7 Mixed Ability Grouping

1.7.1 Why Mixed Ability?

Mixed ability grouping has always been a feature of the college. Organising classes on a mixed ability basis was quite a novel idea in Ireland in the early 1980s. However the first principal of the college earnestly believed in the value of mixed ability grouping, particularly for weaker students. Consequently he actively encouraged the staff to pursue this strategy. From the outset many staff, too, were conscious of the negative consequences of streaming. This view is consistent with the findings of research in the area. Studies by Smyth[1] (1999) Hannan and Boyle[2] (1987), and Reid[3] (1986) all suggest that mixed ability grouping has advantages over streaming. As Drudy and Lynch argue, "... allocation to a low stream is allocation to a position of inferior status, it is a label of failure" (1993: 251). The marginalization of a group of students in this way could well prove counter productive to the school's educational aims.

> The ways that pupils are grouped within and between schools have effects which go beyond academic attainment. There was evidence in our research that where pupils do not feel valued by the school they will seek other ways of maintaining their self-esteem. This may be through sub cultures which hold anti education values ... (Ireson and Hallam, 2001: 201)

Furthermore, results of entrance tests coupled with consultation with primary school teachers highlighted the fact that the majority of the 'weaker' students came from the more socially disadvantaged area i.e. the public housing estates. Therefore streaming of classes in this context carried the added risk of the college mirroring the social disadvantage of the catchment area.

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[1] Smith (1999) found that students in bottom streams under perform in exams and are more likely to intend to drop out of school early.

[2] Hannan and Boyle (1987) found that streaming gave no discernable positive effects on average attainment levels.

[3] Reid (1986) found that as students descend the streams their commitment to school declines.

1.7.2 Forming Class Groups

The following criteria are used when forming first year (mixed ability) class groups:

1. A spread of ability as ascertained by a written assessment

2. A balance of boys and girls

3. The Primary School of origin

4. The addresses of students

5. Additional information including educational and family background

6. Attention to the distribution of minority groups

(Cavanagh and O'Connor, 2004)

These criteria are seen by management and staff as consistent with the college ethos, which endeavours to offer equality to all students. When mixed-ability classes began to function some problems became evident. The weakest students in each group were seen to be struggling and some teachers also found that it was difficult to motivate and challenge the more able students. Many staff had a concern that a number of these top students were not fulfilling their potential. Research supports this finding that mixed ability grouping is not always advantageous to the more able students (Ireson and Hallam[1], 2001).

Over the years mixed-ability has been a regular topic of discussion at staff council meetings. In response to concerns raised the following arrangement has been put in place. It involves some setting and limited streaming.

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[1] Ireson and Hallam found streaming and setting tend to benefit the 'more able students' whereas mixed ability structures tend to benefit the less able (2001: 201).

1.7.3 Current Mixed Ability Arrangements – Junior Cycle

All first year classes are arranged on a mixed ability basis in accordance with the criteria laid down in the Staff Handbook (Cavanagh and O'Connor, 2004). Setting occurs for English, Irish, Mathematics and French. An extra teacher is timetabled for each of these four subjects. This may, or may not, be the resource teacher. The Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) group are withdrawn at these times. Other students experiencing difficulty are also withdrawn to work with the learning support teacher. In this way the learning support needs of the weaker students are met.

At the beginning of second year students are streamed into higher and ordinary level groups for Mathematics and Irish. Similar streaming occurs in French and English at the start of third year. Students remain in their base class (mixed ability group), for all other subjects. This is the group students identify with and as a result the problems of streaming and labelling are minimised.

1.7.4 Mixed Ability at Senior Cycle

Because LCA is a 'stand alone' programme the class is organised on a mixed ability basis for all subjects. This means that there is no facility for students who are particularly gifted in a given area to join the other Leaving Certificate students for that subject. This can be frustrating for students who find the work inappropriate to their ability and could well prove to be a disincentive to more able students who are considering LCA for senior cycle. It also makes real demands on teachers who must cater for the entire ability range in the class.

In both Leaving Certificate Established and LCVP, groups are streamed in fifth year for the four core subjects of English, Irish, Maths and French. These subjects are set to allow students move between ordinary and higher level. For all other subjects classes remain on a mixed ability basis.

To conclude on mixed ability, this is the model currently in place in the case study school. It is regularly discussed at staff council meetings. It is not perfect and problems can arise, but it is accepted as a model, which is fundamentally sound. It is socially inclusive, it prevents stigmatisation, it facilitates necessary remedial intervention and the college believes that it enables students, across a range of abilities, to fulfil their potential.

1.8 Introduction of LCA in the Case Study School

1.8.1 Origins of the Course

LCA was introduced in the case study school in September 1996. At that point it replaced the VPTP[1] programme, which had been in place since September 1986. Teachers, students and parents were unhappy with VPTP for a number of reasons:

- It was a one-year course and many students were leaving school as early as 15/16 years of age

- It lacked national certification of Leaving Certificate status

- A high level of dropout within the programme was undermining its value for remaining participants

LCA was introduced with some reservations. The need for such a programme was clear for senior students who were struggling with the established Leaving Certificate. Each year some

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[1] The Vocational Preparation and Training Programme is discusses in detail below (Chapter Two: 31/33)

students left school in the course of Fifth Year and others were completing the Leaving Certificate but were struggling to achieve five Ds at ordinary level (Source: school records). Nevertheless management and staff harboured some fears that a successful LCA programme could damage the school's academic reputation by attracting weaker students from neighbouring schools. Interestingly other schools had similar reservations as later reported by Boldt (1998) and the DES (2000).

Despite these reservations LCA was introduced. The teaching staff spent time researching the course during the 1995/96 school year. Some planning time was made available on staff days. A number of teachers attended in-service training. A coordinator was appointed (an Assistant Principal) and management displayed commitment to the programme by appointing only teachers who had expressed a desire to teach the programme (Cavanagh, 1999). The first cohort consisted of 38 students; 22 boys and 16 girls. One of the main difficulties encountered in this initial group was a lack of conviction on the part of some students and their parents as to the value of the programme and the subsequent certification. A consequence of this was a very high dropout rate with only 21 of the initial 38 students successfully completing the programme (Source: school records). This problem dissipated in subsequent years as parents became more positively disposed towards LCA and students successfully completed the programme and achieved very good results.

1.8.2 Enrolment in LCA

Within the college LCA has been given high status by the approach taken to enrolment in the programme. Third year students who express an interest in LCA must apply for a place. All applicants are then interviewed (parents of applicants are always consulted prior to interviews taking place). Candidates who fail to convince the planning team of their commitment to

LCA may be asked to attend a second interview. On occasion problematic students are required to complete TY before enrolling to demonstrate their commitment to completing senior cycle. This process endeavours to ensure that LCA is seen as having high status in the school and students value a place on the programme. It has helped ensure that LCA is not seen as a 'soft option' or as a 'dumping ground' for less able or problematic students.

The following criteria are considered when processing applications for LCA:

1. Academic ability and Junior Certificate performance[1]
2. Motivation and commitment to school
3. Attendance and level of home support
4. Likely career path
5. Parental choice
6. Class work and homework   (Cavanagh and O'Connor, 2004)

Ultimately the Principal, the LCA Coordinator and the Year-head have the final say in deciding who is accepted on the programme.

The next section of this chapter gives an outline of the LCA programme and the assessment procedure as outlined in the Programme Statement issued by the DES and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2000).

1.9 Structure of the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme

1.9.1 Sessions

LCA is a distinct, self-contained programme aimed at preparing students for adult and working life. It was developed by the NCCA in conjunction with the DES. It is a

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[1] School records show that the majority of the students who take LCA are students who take few, if any subjects at Higher Level in the Junior Certificate examination.

two-year programme divided into four half-year sessions.

Year 1	**Session 1**	September - January
	Session 2	February - May
Year 2	**Session 3**	September - January
	Session 4	February - May

The LCA programme consists of three main elements.

(a) Vocational Preparation
(b) Vocational Education
(c) General Education

1.9.2 Modules

Each element consists of a range of courses designed on a modular basis (Table 1.1).

Modular Content of Courses	
	(No. of Modules)
Vocational Preparation	
Vocational Preparation and Guidance	8 modules
English and Communications	4 modules
Vocational Education	
Vocational Specialism 1	4 modules
Vocational Specialism 2	4 modules
Mathematical Applications	4 modules
Introduction to Information and Communication Technology	2 modules
General Education	
Social Education	6 modules
Languages:	
Gaeilge	2 modules
Modern European Language	2 modules
Art Education (Dance, Drama, Music, Visual Arts)	2 modules
Leisure and Recreation	2 modules
Elective Modules	
Candidates must complete four elective modules	4 modules
Total	44 modules

Table 1.1   (Adapted from DES/NCCA, 2000: 12)

Candidates must complete 44 modules over the two-year period. Each module is of 30 hours duration. To successfully complete a module a student must achieve 90% attendance and complete a number of key assignments. The NCCA was commissioned by the DES to write the modules. Draft modules were issued in 1995 but following review redrafted modules were published in 2000.

1.9.3 Vocational Specialisms

Each school chooses two vocational specialisms (optional subjects) from the following list. This choice allows some flexibility at local level as schools can choose specialisms, which are appropriate to employment opportunities in their own area.

- Agriculture/Horticulture
- Childcare/Community Care
- Graphics and Construction Studies
- Craft and Design
- Engineering
- Hair and Beauty
- Hotel, Catering and Tourism
- Office Administration and Customer Care
- Technology
- Information and Communications Technology
- Active Leisure Studies

1.9.4 The Student Task

Over the two-year programme students must complete seven tasks.

> The primary purpose of the Student Task is to underpin a key educational principle of the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme, namely integration ... The student task should draw learning together rather than allow it to become or remain a fragmented experience (DES/NCCA, 2000: 25).

A task must be anchored in one of the three areas:

(i)   Vocational Preparation
(ii)   Vocational Education
(iii)   General Education

The aims of the Student Task include:

- ❑ Opportunity to integrate learning and experience from different courses

- ❑ Develop confidence and self-esteem

- ❑ Promote motivation by providing short-term, achievable goals

- ❑ Develop responsibility and initiative

- ❑ Develop skills in self evaluation, problem solving, reflection and management
(Adapted from DES/NCCA, 2000: 25)

Tasks should integrate knowledge and skills acquired in a number of courses. A task should involve a minimum of ten hours of work on the student's part. Tasks are assessed through written report (80%) and interview by an external examiner (20%).

Schedule For Completion Of Seven Student Tasks			
Year 1		Year 2	
Session I	Session II	Session III	Session IV
General Education Task	Vocational Preparation Task	Contemporary Issue Task	Personal Reflection Task
	Vocational Educational Task	Vocational Educational Task	
		Practical Achievement Task	

Table 1.2   (Adapted from DES/NCCA, 2000: 26)

1.9.5 Assessment

A maximum of 200 credits can be awarded for successful completion of the LCA programme.

Credits are allocated as follows:

Allocation of Credits		
	Credits	Percentages
Satisfactory completion of Modules	62	31%
7 Student Tasks	70	35%
Final Examinations	68	34%
Total	200	100%

Table 1.3

Students who successfully complete the LCA programme receive the Leaving Certificate of the Department of Education and Science. The certificate is awarded at three levels:

Pass	120 – 139 credits	(60 – 69%)
Merit	140 – 169 credits	(70 – 84%)
Distinction	170 – 200 credits	(85 – 100%)

A student who fails to successfully complete LCA may be awarded **A Record of Experience**.

Two elements of the course which received considerable attention in the DES (2000) evaluation of LCA were work-experience and the vocational specialisms. The following section gives an outline of how each of these elements operates in the case study school.

1.10 LCA in the Case Study School

1.10.1 Work Experience

Much of the available research on LCA concludes that work experience is a valued component of the programme (Boldt, 1998; O Donnabhain, 1999 and DES, 2000). In the case

study school students undertake four, two-week blocks of work experience over the two-year programme. The school finds the first placement for each student. Thereafter students are required to find their own placements, but placements must be acceptable to the co-ordinator and planning team. Working with family or relatives is actively discouraged. Students who have part-time jobs are not allowed take placements, connected to their jobs. As the school has built up a good relationship with many businesses and employers, finding good placements is rarely problematic.

When students are on work experience all employers are contacted by phone over the first two/three days to check on progress. Visits are occasionally made to placements. Written reports are requested from the employer on completion of work experience (Appendix 9). For their fourth and final placement students who have had a particularly successful work experience may return there. As a result of successful placements students are frequently offered full-time employment on completion of the LCA programme. Employers are requested not to offer permanent positions to students prior to their completion of LCA. To date this has not been an issue.

1.10.2 Choice of Vocational Specialisms

The case study school offers:

      (i)   Hotel Catering and Tourism

and

      (ii)   Graphics and Construction Studies

or

Office Administration and Customer Care

From the outset students did not have a say in what specialisms would be offered as this was determined by the availability of staff and of material resources. All students take Hotel, Catering and Tourism. Students may choose one of the other two specialisms offered. Therefore while it appears that the DES list of specialisms offers great choice, in practice the choice within the case study school is very limited. This is consistent with the national findings of the DES (2000).

1.10.3 Leaving Certificate Applied Results in the Case Study School

The commitment which management and staff have shown to LCA since its introduction has resulted in many LCA students achieving very good results[1] (Figure 1.2).
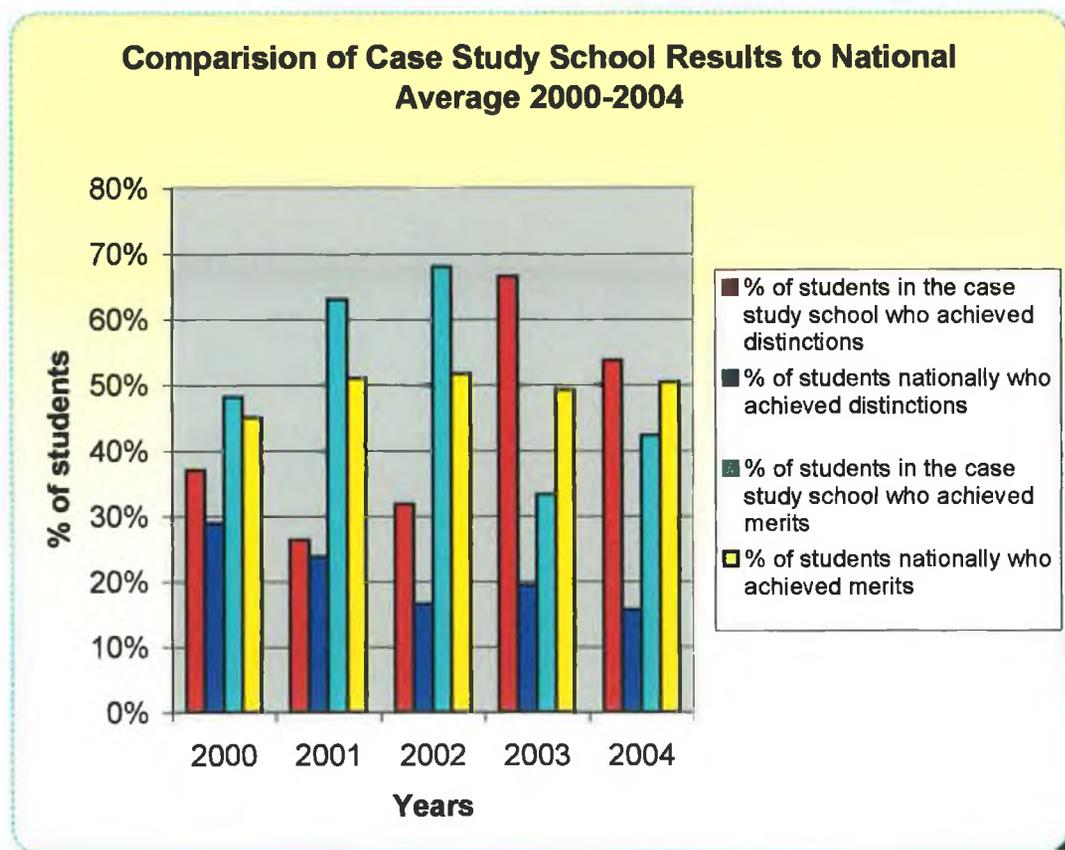
Figure 1.2

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[1] The explanation for the case study school achieving less merits than the national average in 2004 and 2005 is because of the high number of students achieving distinctions in both those years. The national figures were obtained through personal contact with the DES.

Significant numbers of students achieve merits and distinctions in their Leaving Certificate. Over the last five years the school has consistently achieved a higher percentage of distinctions than the national average. During those five years only one student has failed to pass LCA while 93.8% of the 114 students who have taken LCA in that period have achieved either a merit or distinction (Source: school records.)

These results are testament to the hard work and commitment of both staff and students. One of the primary aims of this research arises from this, namely to investigate how these students have progressed on leaving school and entering the world of further education and work.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this section the author will, through a review of the relevant literature, examine the circumstances, which led to the introduction of LCA in 1995. A number of factors are particularly relevant. These include the expansion in senior cycle participation and the resultant problem of many students finding the senior cycle curriculum inappropriate. Also, rising youth unemployment became a significant problem through the 1970s and 1980s. In response a number of new curricular programmes were introduced. These programmes will be discussed as they proved to be the forerunners of LCA. The value of vocational education relative to liberal or academic education will also be discussed as it has a relevance to the worth of the LCA qualification. Likewise new thinking around the nature of intelligence following Gardner's work (1983) is relevant to the introduction of a curriculum, which in the words of Gleeson and Granville values a: "... broad range of intelligences ..." (1996: 126). Finally the status of LCA in schools and the progression routes open to LCA students will be examined, as both are central to the purpose of this thesis.

2.2 The 1960s – A Time of Change

In 1966, a joint Department of Education/OECD report titled *Investment in Education* was published. The report highlighted a number of problems in the Irish educational system. These included:

> ☐ Significant disparity was evident in the educational participation of various socio economic groups - with children from lower income groups seriously under represented in terms of participation and attainment (Government of Ireland, 1966: 173)

□ The following decade would see a substantial deficit in the numbers of qualified people entering the workplace (ibid., 390)

The report concluded that there was need for wider participation in education and for longer retention of pupils in the education system. Following publication of the report, and the ensuing debate, second level educational provision was radically expanded. This was achieved in a number of ways. Primarily free-education was introduced. This offered access to second level education to all students, regardless of family income. Free transport was provided in rural areas. Expansion and reform of the vocational sector at this time also helped to increase participation in second level education as did the raising of the school leaving age to fifteen years in 1972 (Coolahan, 1981: 134).

2.3 Increased Participation

Following these changes the numbers of students staying on in school to senior cycle increased dramatically. In the 1965/66 school year 136,187 students were enrolled in second level schools, ten years later the figure had swelled to 275,526. The number of Leaving Certificate candidates had jumped in the same period from 12,573 to 32,268 (Department of Education statistics 1965/66 and 1976/77). The secretary of the Department of Education at the time later described the increase in participation as a 'tidal swell' (O'Connor, 1986: 193).

2.4 Curricular Change

2.4.1 New Senior Cycle Programmes

As the trend of increased participation continued through the 1970s and 1980s, the lack of appropriate curricular provision for all students became ever more apparent. The vast majority of students continued to pursue the Leaving Certificate Established. This was primarily an academic course best suited to the needs of students intent on progression to third level university education. However a significant proportion of the students now remaining in second level education were not intent on such a course. The plight of these students was gaining increased recognition, as was the plight of young unemployed school leavers.

The economic recession of the 1970s resulted in rising youth unemployment in Europe, particularly of: "... early school leavers without qualification ..." (Herron, 1990: ix). In response the European Community (EC) resolved in 1976 to introduce initiatives to address this problem. A European Community-wide initiative called the Transition I and II Project was introduced to provide vocationally orientated programmes for senior cycle students. A number of Irish Projects introduced at this time include: Community Based Learning, Career Foundation Courses, Work Exploration and Senior Certificate. As Gleeson and Granville (1996) note these programmes had a strong European dimension and significantly: "... made the single most important contribution to curriculum reform in Ireland since the foundation of the state" (1996: 120).

As part of the stated EC strategy the Irish Government introduced a Pre Employment course in 1977. This programme was designed by Shannon Curriculum Unit and comprised of Vocational Studies, Work Experience and General Studies. Leonard

notes that the course became highly popular with the increased numbers staying on at school including the: "… unmotivated and the academically unsuccessful …" (1990: 34). He further argues that 'important changes' which took place in the social and educational contexts of the programme shaped the introduction of the Vocational Preparation and Training Programme (VPTP) in 1984 (ibid., 33). In response to rapidly growing youth unemployment the EC had significantly increased funding to the European Social Fund (ESF) in 1982 and expanded the scheme to cover programmes incorporating: "… vocational training and work experience …" for under 18s (O'Connor, 1998: 58). VPTP was introduced in Ireland under this scheme.

2.4.2 Vocational Preparation Training Programme (VPTP)

On introducing VPTP (also known as VPT 1) the Department suggested that the new programme should be: "… acceptable both as a terminal programme for those making the transition from school to working life and as part of an alternative Senior Cycle programme for those for whom the existing programme is not suitable" (Department of Education, 1984: 5). VPTP was a one-year course. Vocational Studies, Preparation for Working Life and General Studies were the three main elements of the course. Vocational Studies was intended to give students a broadly based preparation for entry into a given field of employment. Work experience was intended to allow students get first-hand experience of a variety of work roles. General Studies was intended to aid the students' personal development and to develop skills of communication and numeracy. In evaluating the success of the programme, five years after its inception, Leonard concluded that VPTP had enjoyed mixed success. He suggests that the high levels of participation demonstrated: "… the existence of a

nation-wide need for a senior cycle course aimed at preparing young people for transition to adult and working life" (Leonard, 1990: 44).

Williams and McNamara (1985) note that while the course did not carry any formal certification it offered an alternative senior cycle curriculum which was: "... practical, imaginative and of genuine educational value" (1985: 2).

2.4.3 Spiral II

Senior Certificate programmes developed under the title Spiral II (1983/87) also influenced the introduction of LCA (O Donnabhain, 1998: 48). Spiral II was developed as one of the Transition II European Community Projects. Its aim was to assist young people in the transition from education to working life. The programme was co-ordinated by the Department of Education and managed by Shannon Curriculum Development Centre. It developed seven Senior Certificate programmes. The Department of Education provided national examinations and certification for these seven programmes. Students could receive certification at one of three levels:

- ✓ Distinction
- ✓ Merit
- ✓ Pass

Assessment included oral and aural tests, written reports and interviews. On completion each student was presented with a Record of Personal Experience and Achievement. In summing up on the implication of Spiral II for the general education system Gleeson suggests: "... these programmes are based on a great deal of experience and, as such, form a sound basis for further development" (1990: 80).

Fortunately this advice has been taken and as Gleeson and Granville point out the approach to the development of LCA drew on the: "... experiences of those recognised for their good practice ... in teaching on programmes such as Senior Certificate and VPT 1 ..." (1996: 120). The influence of VPT 1 and Senior Certificate on LCA can be seen through the inclusion of aspects such as Work Experience and Vocational Preparation. Also written reports and interviews are included in the assessment procedure and the certificate is awarded at Distinction, Merit or Pass level.

Another significant feature of LCA is that it was introduced as a 'ring-fenced' or 'stand-alone' programme. Boldt describes it as: "... distinctive in its structure, focus, methodology, delivery and assessment" (1998: 7). As Gleeson and Granville argue this 'protects and defends' the identity of LCA and makes a statement that the programme is a real alternative (1996: 124).

2.5 Need for an Alternative Leaving Certificate

2.5.1 Leaving Certificate Established not Meeting the Needs of All

One of the difficulties with programmes such as VPT 1 and Senior Certificate was their lack of credentials of equitable status to that of the Leaving Certificate. Also as many of the programmes were of one-year duration students were leaving school at an early age. Much of educational debate of the period was focused on the unsuitability of the Leaving Certificate for a significant proportion of students. As Boland and McNamara noted:

> It is suggested that anywhere between 20% and 50% of these remaining at Senior Cycle and following for the most part the Leaving Certificate

Programme, are not being well catered for. Comments to this effect have been made by the OECD, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the Conference of Major Religious Superiors, the Culliton Committee and by several other bodies (Boland and McNamara, 1994: 181).

The OECD report of 1991 voiced the need for a stronger technical/vocational element at second level (OECD, 1991). The Curriculum Awareness Action Group (CAAG) (1990) concluded that the Leaving Certificate Established was unsuitable for one in four students in the voluntary private secondary school sector. Hannan and Shortall (1991) found that many students were unhappy with their education and were experiencing little satisfaction from following: "… broad and shallow, Pass level, subject tracks" (1991: 206). In its publication *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Towards the New Century* the NCCA proposed that: "… the provision of quality experience to all students must be a priority" (1993: 51). The report proposed a new programme which should have: "… integrity of educational purpose" and crucially it proposed that a new programme must also be a Leaving Certificate (1993: 52). This was important because as Gleeson and Granville note the title Leaving Certificate carries 'social kudos' (1996: 117). With this title the new programme was more likely to achieve social acceptability.

By this time the need for a new programme was recognised at the highest level. The Report of the National Education Convention makes reference to the need for an 'alternative' at Leaving Certificate Level (Coolahan, 1994: 76). The White Paper *'Charting Our Education Future'* stated:

> … the traditional Leaving Certificate does not cater adequately for the variety of needs and abilities of students … A fundamental objective of the restructuring of Senior Cycle is to cater more effectively for the needs and aptitudes of all students (Government of Ireland, 1995: 51).

It was against this background, of a general consensus on the need for an alternative programme at senior cycle, that LCA was introduced. Indeed the Draft Programme Statement of LCA echoes the point: "The suitability of the traditional Leaving Certificate to meet the needs of all Senior Cycle pupils has been subject to question for a number of years ..." (DES/NCCA, 1995: 2).

Two significant societal factors, which underlined the need for an alternative Leaving Certificate, are worthy of discussion at this point. These are the increasing importance of educational credentials and the plight of unqualified early school leavers.

2.5.2 Educational Credentials

In Ireland the recession of the 1980s increased the value of educational credentials:

> There has been a marked rise in credentialism in education over the 1980s i.e. an increase in the importance of qualifications, in the level of qualification required for occupational entry and in the use of such qualifications to restrict access to the more prestigious occupations (Drudy and Lynch, 1993: 23).

Clancy argues each individual achieves his 'occupational role' in life (1995: 470). Possession of educational credentials enhances one's prospects of achieving a more prestigious role. Conversely the lack of educational credentials i.e. those who leave school with no qualifications become as Drudy and Lynch suggest: "... the most vulnerable group within the labour market and those more prone to unemployment" (Drudy and Lynch, 1993: 145). Collins (1979) describes education as a 'positional good' in the sense that it is a 'screening' device for selecting and allocating individuals to the labour market (cited in Clancy, 1995: 472). Quinn (1998) agrees that this happens in many companies. Therefore the possession of educational

credentials is critical to one's prospects in the workplace. Those in possession of credentials enjoy a position of enhanced opportunity, while those without find themselves seriously disadvantaged.

2.5.3 Early School Leaving

O Donnabhain (1999) suggests that LCA was introduced (along with LCVP) as part of a strategy to expand senior cycle to help keep: "... at least 90% ..." of the population in full time education, up to the age of eighteen (Government of Ireland, 1995: 45).

This raises the question why is retention considered so important? Or conversely why is early school leaving problematic? It is problematic because early school leavers are at a significant disadvantage in the labour market relative to those with qualifications as the findings of the 2002 Annual School Leavers Survey demonstrate. The report concludes:

> ➤ A strong relationship exists between labour market status and education level (Gorby et al., 2003: 21)
>
> ➤ The proportion of school leavers classified as unemployed increases the lower the level of qualification[1] (ibid., 8-9)
>
> ➤ Educational attainment and earnings are closely connected. Earnings increase steadily as education attainment increases (ibid., 29)

These findings are supported by earlier research, which found that it takes longer for those with lower educational levels to obtain their first job (Hannan, McCabe and

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[1] School leavers who completed Leaving Certificate recorded an unemployment rate of less that 5%. In contrast school leavers with no qualifications recorded an unemployment rate of 44% (Gorby et al. 2003)

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McCoy, 1998). Early school leavers are substantially disadvantaged in terms of unemployment rates relative to those who leave on completion of the Leaving Certificate (O'Shea and Williams, 2001). Those who leave before the Junior Certificate or those who fail their last examination have the lowest probability of employment (McCoy and Hannan, 1995). At the time of the introduction of LCA in 1995 approximately 16% of students were leaving on completion of the Junior Certificate while an estimated 3%[1] were leaving with no formal qualifications (Collins and Williams, 1998). A further 7,200 people were leaving with an inadequate Leaving Certificate (i.e. less than five passes) (Hyland, 2000). Many of these people were struggling in the labour market.

As The National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) report concludes:
" ... education is a key element in enabling young people to compete for job opportunities and weak educational background seriously limits those opportunities" (NESF, 1997: 21). These findings lend credence to the argument that retention of students to completion of senior cycle is a valid and laudable aim. Boldt (1998) and the DES (2000) both found that LCA has improved retention. One of the central questions of this thesis follows from this. Now that these students are retained in school and achieve their educational credentials what value do these credentials hold in the world of further education and in the world of work? The very fact that any question at all arises as to the value of the LCA qualification relates to another question, which permeates the world of education - namely the value of vocational education relative to liberal/academic education.

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[1] In addition to the early leavers from second level it was estimated that up to 1,000 young people were not transferring from primary to second level each year in the mid 1990s (Hannan, 1996).

2.6 Vocational Education

2.6.1 Status of Vocational Education

Trant argues: "... vocational education traditionally has had a low status in comparison with academic or general education" (1999: 19). Historically this has been the situation in Ireland and indeed in many western societies. The debate as to the relative value of vocational education versus liberal education dates back to the time of Plato. Trant (1999) suggests that 'liberal' and 'vocational' are essentially historical terms which have acquired meaning over time and each has been used in different ways at various times in history. He argues the terms can refer to two distinct 'educational philosophies' or alternatively to two 'educational methodologies' (1999: 6).

Pring (1995), in attempting to define our traditional understanding of liberal education suggests that: "... liberal education was based firmly on the nature of knowledge learnt not as a set of inert and discrete ideas but as disciplines of active thinking, internalised and inter-connecting with each other" (Pring, 1995: 184). The problem Pring finds with this interpretation of liberal education is that it is exclusive. He suggests it 'writes off too many young people'. The liberal tradition places too great an emphasis on the world of 'ideas' and ignores the world of 'practice' (ibid., 186). He goes on to define vocational preparation as: "the acquisition of skills, qualities, attitudes and knowledge that are judged to be important for entry into the world of work ..." (ibid., 187). In this situation the value of what is learnt is not justified by reference to its intrinsic worth but rather by its usefulness. He further argues that behind the liberal/vocational divide there is a 'false dichotomy' – between theory and practice. He suggests theory is associated with 'deep understanding' whereas practice

is associated with 'doing' rather than 'thinking' (ibid., 189). However, as Pring argues, this separation of theory from practice does not benefit either the strong or the weak student. While he differentiates between education and training he also concludes that they do not have to be exclusive. If training is properly conducted one can be educated through it (ibid., 189).

In conclusion Pring suggests that while liberal education is under threat we must acknowledge: " Vocational relevance has an important place ... It encourages us to reconsider the place of practical intelligence, of personal development, of social and community relevance" (Pring, 1995: 194). All of these areas are referred to in the Programme Statement for LCA. The statement emphasises that the programme places a premium on the 'personal and social development' of participants and also has a strong 'community base' to compliment the school as a learning site (DES/NCCA, 2000: 8).

Trant argues that vocational education should be as 'liberalising and humanising' as the traditional academic approach (1999: 17). Therefore there should be no educational basis for a 'hierarchal distinction' between the academic and the vocational. As our world changes and becomes more technological we must be open to the inclusion of new areas of study. Languages, mathematics, science and the arts have all been included in what was once the domain of the Latin and Greek classics. Today technology is being included as are other subjects traditionally considered 'vocational' (ibid., 18). As Trant concludes, every age has to rediscover for itself the essential meaning of education: "... we do not reject the past; we re-evaluate it so that instead of a burden it becomes a blessing" (ibid.,18).

Such an approach should allow new programmes such as the Leaving Certificate Applied to receive parity of esteem in our world, in the school, or in the learning site. Further research is required to establish if LCA participants are indeed afforded this parity of esteem.

2.6.2 Vocational Education in Second Level Schools

In Ireland vocational schools[1] have traditionally provided for vocational education at second level. From the outset the vocational schools were at a disadvantage and had to compete with what Drudy and Lynch describe as the: ... "more prestigious and selective secondary sector" (1993: 125). As Coolahan notes the vocational schools found themselves competing on an unequal footing with the secondary schools as they got more than their fair share of 'less academically able' students (1981: 202).

Following curricular reform of the late 1960s and 1970s vocational schools were now allowed to offer the Intermediate Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Examinations (O' Connor, 1986: 141). However this did not enhance the position of vocational education as the pressure to prepare students for examinations resulted in vocational education and training taking second place to the academic curriculum. Also the increase in numbers following the advent of free education put pressure on the vocational school sector and O'Connor argues had the effect of: "... devaluing the vocational tradition and vocational education in general" (O'Connor, 1998: 67). While vocational education was struggling to make an impact at second level greater progress was being made in the third level sector.

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[1] Vocational schools came into existence following the Vocational Education Act of 1930.

2.6.3 Third Level Vocational Education

At this level some changes had taken place with a move from the academic to the technical/vocational. In 1968 almost 80% of total enrolments in higher education was in the university sector. By 1992 only 51% of new entrants to third level were enrolling in the university sector (Clancy, 1995: 481). The setting up of the Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs) in the 1960s and two Higher Institutes of Education had proved a resounding success and had led a trend towards 'vocationalism' in higher education (ibid., 481). Also the advent of Post Leaving Certificate Courses[1] (PLCs) was providing an outlet for students intent on pursuing vocationally oriented courses. The high unemployment of the 1980s and the high percentage of students completing senior cycle at second level resulted in a dramatic rise in the number of students enrolling in PLC courses[2].

To conclude on the status of vocational education it is apparent that academic education has traditionally enjoyed a very privileged position in Ireland. The dominance of the secondary school sector over the vocational sector, the public examination system and the importance of educational credentials have all contributed to this situation. Curricular reform of the vocational sector and the expansion of senior cycle to include the LCVP and LCA programmes have helped to redress the imbalance.

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[1] PLCs were run mainly in vocational schools where vocational studies and work experience constituted the main elements (Clancy, 1995).

[2] The figure rose from 12,000 in 1989, to over 18,000 by 1995 and to 26,658 by 2002 (McIver, 2003: vii).

New thinking around the nature of intelligence emerged in the 1980s. As this has the potential to have real impact on the status of vocational education it merits some discussion at this point.

2.6.4 Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences

New thinking about the nature of intelligence, prompted primarily by the work of Gardner, offers exciting possibilities for the future of the curriculum for the less academic student. In 1983 Howard Gardner proposed that humans possess seven identifiable intelligences. In 1997 he added an eight. They are as follows:

1. Linguistic Intelligence

2. Logical-mathematical Intelligence

3. Musical Intelligence

4. Spatial Intelligence

5. Bodily-kinaesthetic Intelligence

6. Interpersonal Intelligence

7. Intrapersonal Intelligence

8. Naturalist Intelligence

(Adapted from Naughton, 2000)

Gardner's theory of 'Multiple Intelligences' – while not universally accepted – has revolutionised the thinking around human intelligence. Prior to Gardener's Theory the IQ (intelligence quotient), as devised by Stern (cited in Naughton, 2000), was widely used as a test of intelligence. However as Lynch notes intelligence tests such as the IQ test are 'predominantly verbal tests' and people who are not verbally proficient cannot score highly on them (1992: 136). Lynch argues that the fairness of

intelligence tests must be questioned. Certain features of the tests are 'social class biased' and students from well resourced, ambitious families are likely to be at an advantage (1992: 137). Such families are likely to place a high value on education and are in a financial position to purchase tuition for their children if they wish.

As Drudy and Lynch argue our definition of intelligence is hugely significant for our students. If our view of intelligence is limited it means: "… our vision of what is both educationally possible and desirable has been and continues to be seriously circumscribed by the narrowness of our view of intelligence and human ability" (Drudy and Lynch, 1993: 239). Gardner's theory has radically altered this view as Naughton argues: "… the theory of multiple intelligences challenges some of the most fundamental and commonly held beliefs about the nature of intelligence" (Naughton, 2000: 33). This too must challenge the validity of the very concept of a narrow academic curriculum. As Lynch argues if an educational system defines intelligence narrowly i.e. 'primarily verbal and/or mathematical' then those students who do not possess these abilities will only experience negativity and failure in school (Lynch, 1992: 139). This may well have been the experience of many students in Irish schools, who found they were pursuing a senior curriculum, which did not match their needs or abilities.

Hopefully this is where the potential of the LCA programme can be realised. With its broader view of intelligence it should offer scope to those students who find their progress restricted within the narrow confines of the academic curriculum. As Gleeson and Granville suggest:

> The Leaving Certificate Applied, with the emphasis on breadth and balance, and on the application of knowledge and skills to the solution of practical

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problems, attempts to reward a very broad range of intelligences, abilities, competencies, achievements and practical skills (1996: 126).

Boldt too sees that LCA offers an alternative view on students 'abilities, intelligences and pedagogical needs' (1998: 44). He suggests that LCA: "... is an excellent programme ... catering for a wide range of students with a variety of interests, abilities and intelligences" (1998: 42). If Boldt is correct LCA is offering a real alternative to many of our students.

2.7 Status of Leaving Certificate Applied

How LCA is perceived, and its status relative to the established Leaving Certificate is of grave concern for all involved with the programme. Quinn (1998) argues that the traditional Leaving Certificate is almost universally accepted as a 'reliable' measure of ability. He warns of the difficulty of changing this perception so that new programmes such as LCA will be accepted (1998: 133). From the outset there were problems with the perception of LCA. Difficulties[1] around its introduction exacerbated the problems and O Donnabhain reflects that these difficulties served to: "... undermine the credibility of a programme that already had a serious image problem because of its target group and its limited progression opportunities" (O Donnabhain, 1999: 236). However the programme did commence, in fifty-three schools, in September 1995. External assessment of the student tasks, later that year, gave credibility to the programme because of the professional nature of its conduct. Likewise the prompt publication of the first set of results gave the programme a further boost.

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[1] Industrial relations problems between the Department of Education and the teacher unions prevented induction workshops going ahead in June of 1995. The Minister for Education announced a deferral of the introduction of the programme for one year. When the industrial problems were resolved later that summer the Minister reversed his decision and the programme was introduced in September 1995 (O Donnabhain, 1999: 236).

Certain problems remained. The Conference of Religious of Ireland (CORI) suggest that some schools showed reluctance to offer LCA as they feared damage to their 'academic' reputations (1998: 8). Later research by Boldt (1998) and DES (2000) support this view. Trant et al. (1999) identified the following as indicators of the low status of Leaving Certificate Applied:

- ❑ The reluctance of ambitious parents to enrol their children

- ❑ The negative public perceptions of participants

- ❑ Derogatory comments made by other students about LCA participants

- ❑ The negative perceptions some teachers have of LCA students

- ❑ Doubts about the acceptability of LCA as an entry qualification to some vocational training programmes

- ❑ The tendency of employers to require specific grades in Leaving Certificate subjects as entry criteria for certain jobs

(Trant et al., 1999: 42)

Research[1] carried out in 1996/97 concluded that LCA appeared to be having a positive impact on participants:

> ... they appear to be happier, more confident, more sensitive to the talents and the needs of others, better briefed on the world of work and better briefed to keep themselves informed on issues relating to their world" (O Donnabhain, 1999: 251).

However on a more cautious note he also suggests that LCA students may find that qualifications based on the type of learning they have experienced may enjoy 'very limited currency' in a world that has been dominated by subject based examinations (ibid., 251). O Donnabhain fears that on completion students may find the barriers

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[1] This case study was part of a research project designed to examine vocational education in five countries. The aim of the project was to find ways of improving the status and attractiveness of vocational education.

too great and may opt out of the formal education system and settle for low skilled jobs or even unemployment. Again this reverts back to one of the central questions of this thesis. Is this the experience of students of St. John's Community College? Do they opt out of the formal education system? Do they settle for low skilled jobs? How many of them are unemployed? To date no investigation has been carried out to check on the progress of these young people on their completion of LCA.

2.8 Progression Routes Open to LCA Students

FAS accepts LCA students with a minimum of 50 credits to standard based apprenticeships. Semi state companies such as the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) also accept LCA graduates. It is possible to get a Nursing qualification by first completing a Pre Nursing Studies PLC. The Garda Siochana accepts applications from those holding a merit or distinction in LCA. CERT training courses are open to LCA students and many of the banks also accept applications from those holding a merit or distinction.

Access to third level is more restrictive for LCA students. LCA does not qualify a student for direct entry to university. However it is possible for a student to get to third level through a progression route encompassing PLC courses. Many PLC courses carry a FETAC Level 2 award, which will allow a student to progress to further certificate courses in an Institute of Technology or in a College of Further Education. These certificate courses in turn allow for progression to diploma courses and eventually to degree level. FETAC Level 2 also allows progression to some universities through a scheme called the Higher Education Links Scheme[1]. For

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[1] This scheme links specific FETAC awards to reserved places on higher education courses.

progression to certificate and diploma courses students must score highly in their PLC courses and this has the potential to prove problematic for many LCA students. Clearly the third level route is restrictive and takes longer for an LCA student.

The NESF sees this limited access contributing to the problem of the under representation of the working classes in third level education as LCA students are 'predominantly' of working class origin (NESF, 2002: 55). It also points out that this limit of access has the potential to result in the development of a 'two-tiered' system in senior cycle. Participation in an alternative programme such as LCA may be perceived as an inability to cope with the established Leaving Certificate (ibid., 55). A two-tiered system may well lead to a perception of LCA as an inferior course.

O Donnabhain too, sees the access route through PLC courses as a problem in so far as it implies that LCA students are 'inferior' to their Leaving Certificate counterparts (1998: 50). He argues that above average performers should have direct access to diploma or other certificate courses at Institutes of Technology. Similarly he suggests that students with distinctions should be facilitated to: "... proceed with their career development at the highest possible level" (O Donnabhain, 1998: 51). Indeed Gleeson and Granville have argued for 'positive discrimination' in favour of LCA students, where specific training and career opportunities should be set-aside for them (1996: 122).

The NESF (2002) report also emphasised the need for an investigation of employers' perception of LCA. Bray asks the question is the LCA a 'real' Leaving Certificate

(1996: 102). This question is central to this study. Do employers consider it a 'real' qualification? Do the students who complete the course consider it a 'real' qualification? As Gleeson and Granville argue the introduction of 'quality education programmes' is reform of worth in its own right. However it does not automatically translate into: "... the hard currency of social, economic and employment recognition" (Gleeson and Granville, 1996: 117). They suggest that it is indefensible to offer LCA students learning experiences which allow them to savour success, possibly for the first time in years while providing certification which has: "... little or no currency in the market place ..." (ibid., 127). As Madden argues the key point is to give recognition to people for: "... what they know and what they can do, not where they learned it" (1996: 113).

2.9 The National Evaluation of LCA

In 1999 the DES undertook a National Evaluation of LCA. The evaluation focused on three aspects of the programme:

(i)   Planning and Management

(ii)   Implementation

(iii)   Outcomes   (DES, 2000: 9)

To conduct the research inspectors visited 47 schools and 2 out-of-school centres. Discussion and interviews were held with principals, students[1] and teachers.

The inspectors found that overall schools were very positive about the impact LCA was having. The programme appeared to be meeting the needs of a group whose

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[1] The student voice is not heard in the DES report.

needs were not previously met. Schools reported improved retention at senior cycle. Short-term goals and immediate feedback were proving very popular with students. Student Tasks and Key Assignments were seen as strengths of the programme. Work Experience was helping to create links with business and industry in local communities. Delivering the LCA programme had enhanced teacher skills through exposing them to a new range of methodologies.

Some problems were also noted. The use of time for certain courses was not always as recommended. In some schools where large numbers of staff had been involved in implementation, communication and teamwork were proving problematic. The full range of teaching methodologies was not employed in all schools. There was greater scope for community involvement in the programme. Also the potential of Information Communications Technology was not being fully exploited.

Among the key recommendations of the report were:

- ✓ The need for a school policy document outlining aims and objectives of the LCA programme

- ✓ The establishment of a core planning group in each school

- ✓ A time allowance should be made available for co-ordinators

- ✓ Schools should work on developing links with the local community

- ✓ New teachers should continue to receive in-career development
(DES, 2000: 11/12)

In line with its general thrust the report concludes on a positive note: " ... LCA ... has indeed been proven to have enriched the education provision for many young people in schools" (DES, 2000: 78).

2.10 Conclusion

The need for an alternative to the traditional Leaving Certificate became apparent as increased participation in second level education followed the changes of the 1960s and the high youth unemployment of the 1970s. In 1995, LCA, a distinct stand alone Leaving Certificate Programme was introduced. It was modelled on Senior Certificate programmes introduced under a scheme funded by the ESF in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is designed to offer an alternative certified programme, which recognises a wider range of abilities, interests and intelligences than the Leaving Certificate Established. Early evaluation by Boldt (1998) and DES (2000) suggest that it is proving to be a positive experience for many students. This research sets out to investigate if this is the experience of LCA students in St. John's Community College.

Chapter Three

Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter the author will outline the rationale for this study and state its objectives. The research methodology will be discussed with reference to some ethical issues and the danger of researcher bias. Reference will be made throughout to a number of texts on educational research methodology, which have helped guide this study. The chapter will conclude with a brief discussion of data analysis.

3.2 The Researcher

The author is a whole time permanent teacher in the case study school and holds a post of responsibility, at the level of assistant principal. The author is fully aware that certain issues arise for the inside researcher. There are advantages to doing research within one's own school as Bell suggests; one has an 'intimate knowledge' of the context of the research and practical issues such as travel are not a problem (1999: 43). However there are also disadvantages, for example, things are taken for granted by an inside researcher which should be questioned (Munn and Drever, 1995: 3). With this in mind the author endeavoured to follow the advice of Elliot who suggests that when doing research in one's own school one must take on the 'persona of the outside researcher' (1991: 63).

Throughout the study the author was conscious that his position as a teacher, in a middle management role, in the school could inadvertently lead to bias in carrying out the study or in presentation of the findings. As Bogdan and Biklen argue:

"Acknowledge that no matter how much you try you cannot divorce your research and writing from your past experiences, who you are, what you believe and what you value" (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003: 34). Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (1996) warn that a consideration of possible or actual ethical issues is an essential part of any research topic. With this in mind the author strove for objectivity in designing the research instruments, in carrying out the research and in the presentation of the findings: "... objectivity means being honest, going to the source to gather data, and eliciting the views of those involved in the issue" (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003: 226).

The author has endeavoured to be totally honest throughout with all the participants about the nature and purpose of the study. Initially permission was sought from the school Principal to pursue this investigation and thereafter permission was sought from each of the participants in turn. Kane's advice was considered paramount:

"Do not think of those you study as subjects; they are people with feelings, dignity and rights" (Kane, 1995: 211).

In presenting the findings the author was constantly mindful of the need to be sensitive to the school while also endeavouring to be fair to all of the participants by recording all the findings accurately.

3.3 Rationale for the Study

3.3.1 Investigating the LCA Experience

The researcher works in a school in West County Dublin which has offered the LCA programme since 1996. Many students achieve very good results in LCA. However no investigation has even been carried out on how these students progress after they leave second level education. Furthermore their experience of the programme and

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their satisfaction with their qualification has not been investigated. The researcher is interested in hearing former students describe their experience of the LCA programme and also wishes to investigate how they fared in the 'real' world on completion of LCA. The researcher also wants to hear what employers and third level teachers have to say about students who have graduated from the LCA programme.

3.3.2 Objectives of the Study

- ☐ To investigate the senior cycle experience of LCA students in the case study school

- ☐ To investigate what percentage of LCA students progress to further education and to investigate how far they progress through the third level education system

- ☐ To investigate the nature of the employment LCA students secure

- ☐ To investigate their level of satisfaction with their LCA qualification

- ☐ To discover areas where the case study school can enhance the experience of LCA students

3.3.3 The Purpose of the Interviews with LCA Graduates

To give the students **voice** in describing:

- Their experience of the LCA programme

- Their level of satisfaction with the programme

- Their experiences, as LCA graduates, in the world of further education and in the labour market

3.3.4 The Purpose of the Interviews with Third Level Teachers

- To examine how LCA graduates fare in further education

- To examine their progress in relation to Leaving Certificate Established students

- To investigate if on completion of their programme LCA graduates demonstrate particular strengths or particular weaknesses

3.3.5 The Purpose of the Interviews with Employers

- To investigate employer perception of LCA graduates

- To investigate how they compare to Leaving Certificate Established students in the labour market

- To investigate what strengths and weaknesses they bring to the work place

3.4 Rationale for the Research Instruments

After much careful deliberation the researcher decided on the use of questionnaires and interviews as the most appropriate research instruments. The researcher believed that a postal questionnaire would allow for a sample, large enough to ensure sufficient quantitative data was collected to establish patterns of progression post LCA. Follow up interviews were chosen because giving voice to the graduates and recording their responses was a priority of this research. The DES (2000) evaluation of LCA had failed to do the latter. Bell (1999) and King et al. (1987) argue that interviews allow the interviewer to pursue unanticipated lines of inquiry and investigate motives and feelings, which the questionnaire can never do. In line with this advice the researcher decided to interview a sub sample of respondents.

3.5 Research Group

LCA was first offered in the case study school in 1996 with the first class completing the programme in 1998. LCA has been offered every year since 1996 and students have graduated each year since 1998. The researcher decided to survey a sample of graduates from each year commencing 1998 through to 2004. In this way it was hoped that changes in student perception and satisfaction with the programme, as it

has evolved, should emerge in the findings. Therefore the research group comprised of a stratified random sample. A balance was maintained between male and female students, and between high and low achievers. A total of 42 students, six from each of the study years 1998 to 2004 were surveyed.

As the earlier graduates in the research group had left school seven years prior to the commencement of this study the researcher aimed to make contact, by telephone, with all participants prior to distributing the questionnaire. There were a number of reasons for this:

(a) The researcher had never taught many of the research group and believed that it would be courteous to ask their permission prior to distributing questionnaires.

(b) As literacy levels among LCA students can be low the researcher had concerns about the possibility of a poor response to a written survey.

(c) It gave the researcher an opportunity to explain, in person, the purpose of the study. Cohen, Manion and Morrison suggest that the 'purpose and procedures' of the research should be explained to the subjects at the outset (2000: 71). Delamont also suggests that the initial contact should be made 'in person' by telephone and by letter (2002: 97).

Making contact proved difficult as many of the telephone numbers on file are now invalid. The researcher did succeed in contacting 28 of the 42 graduates selected and

all agreed to participate in the study. Graduates from earlier years of the study proved most difficult to contact. Interestingly the response rate from these years was also lower.

3.6 Questionnaires

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) suggest that frequently the postal questionnaire is the best form of survey in an educational inquiry. King et al. (1987) outline the following advantages to questionnaires:

- ✓ They allow respondents time to think before responding

- ✓ They can be answered anonymously

- ✓ They can be given simultaneously to many people at different sites

- ✓ They can be mailed

- ✓ They impose uniformity on the information obtained by asking respondents the same things
(King, Morris and Taylor Fitz-Gibbon, 1987: 47)

Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1996: 225) concur with the points on greater anonymity and 'considered answers' as a result of allowing candidates time to answer questions. However they see the following disadvantages with questionnaires:

- ➤ Require simple easily understood questions

- ➤ Do not allow researchers to probe for additional information

- ➤ Researcher cannot control who fills out the questionnaires

- ➤ Response rates are low

(Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1996: 225)

The researcher believed that these disadvantages could be overcome. Firstly it was hoped that the telephone contact should prevent a low response rate. The

questionnaires could not easily be completed by anyone other than an LCA graduate and the follow up interviews should offer the opportunity to probe, more deeply, issues which emerge from the questionnaire.

A carefully constructed questionnaire, which would elicit a significant amount of information without requiring long written answers, was considered most appropriate for the particular participants involved. The design incorporated the advice of Fink (1995) who emphasises the importance of a clear layout, which is sensitive to the language levels of the respondents. A number of open-ended questions were included which it was hoped would provide a good insight to the participants' perception of LCA: "... open ended response permits one to understand the world as seen by the respondent" (Quinn Patton, 1987: 11).

On the 21st February 42 questionnaires were mailed. A stamped addressed envelope and a covering letter explaining the nature and purpose of the survey accompanied each questionnaire. Confidentiality was assured. In total 33 of the 42 questionnaires were returned completed and these form the basis of the quantitative findings of the survey.

3.7 The Pilot Study

The literature stresses the importance of a pilot study:

> A pilot survey ... can help ... to give some preliminary warnings and assistance on problem areas such as questions which are sensitive or meaningless, or which elicit vague responses (Kane, 1995: 73).

Following this advice the questionnaire was piloted on a group of LCA graduates in a College of Further Education. Permission was granted by the third level Principal to access the students. The Principal was particularly interested in the study and invited

the researcher to return to the college to interview teachers at a later date. Some small revisions were made to the questionnaire in light of the comments and responses of the pilot group.

A copy of the final questionnaire is presented in Appendix 3.

3.8 The Interview

While it was envisaged that the questionnaires would provide substantial quantitative data the researcher was also keen to seek more in-depth qualitative responses. The literature emphasises the value of interviews:

> Follow up interviews with a sub sample of respondents can provide meaningful additional detail to help make sense out of and interpret survey results. Qualitative data can put flesh on the bones of quantitative results, bringing the results to life through in-depth case elaborations (Quinn Patton, 1987: 38).

Bogdan and Biklen (2003) agree that interviews have much to offer the researcher: "Good interviews produce rich data filled with words that reveal the respondents perspectives" (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003: 96).

When initial contact was made with the graduates to seek their permission prior to mailing the questionnaires a number had expressed a wish to be involved in the follow up interview. Further to this a number of graduates voluntarily signed their questionnaires. These were, in the main, people who held strong views on some of the issues raised. From both these groups a sample of students was selected for interview. Attention was paid to year and gender balance. Likewise a balance was sought between graduates who were positively disposed to LCA and those who were more negative or who regretted their decision to do LCA.

3.9 Focus Groups

In order to gain a broad range of opinions and responses focus group interviews were considered most appropriate. Morgan (1988) suggests groups of between four and twelve participants. As all the participants have left school and all are working scheduling interviews proved difficult. Some graduates work evenings, some are involved in sports and clubs and some no longer reside at home. Bearing these factors in mind the researcher decided to schedule interviews for groups of four participants. Even so two graduates cancelled at very short notice. Both participants were very keen to reschedule and were later interviewed individually. In total three focus group interviews were conducted.

Fully aware that those who agreed to participate were doing the researcher a 'favour' the graduates were offered choice of date and time (Bell, 1999: 46). All were fully informed of the nature and purpose of the study in line with the advice of Cohen et al. who suggest: "The purpose and procedures of the research should be fully explained to the subjects at the outset" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000: 71).

3.10 Recording Interviews

All of the graduate interviews were taped as recording offers a number of advantages: "Recorded interviews enable you to summarise the information using exact quotations from the respondent ..." (King et al., 1987: 83). Also the researcher believed that note taking could break the flow of the discussion and would at best provide an incomplete record of the interview. There are certain disadvantages, however, to recording

interviews: "Tape recording may however make respondents anxious and less likely to reveal confidential information ..." (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 1996: 154).

A further drawback in recording is the possibility that a less open response may be forthcoming as the participants are aware that the tape will be played back by the researcher. To counteract this, the researcher attempted to create a relaxed atmosphere and conversed informally with the participants prior to recording. This is in line with the advice of Bogdan and Biklen (2003) who suggest that good interviews are those in which the subjects are at ease and talk freely about their point of view.

Bogdan and Biklen (2003) also warn that one should never record without permission. The researcher considered this an ethical issue and in each case the participants' permission to record was sought and they were fully aware that they could withdraw their consent at any time, in the interview, if they so wished.

3.11 Triangulation

Denzin (1978) describes data triangulation as 'the use of a variety of data sources in a survey' (cited in Quinn Patton, 1987: 60). The author collected data from a number of sources; LCA graduates, third level teachers, employers and the LCA coordinator in the case study school. Triangulation is described by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) as the use of two or more methods of data collection. The author employed two methods of data collection, namely questionnaires and interviews. The purpose of this was to increase the validity of the findings. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) suggest that validity is an essential component of educational research. Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias suggest: "If the findings yielded by the different

data collection methods are consistent, the validity of those findings is increased" (1996: 206).

3.12 Teacher and Employer Interviews

Three Colleges of Further Education were targeted for the teacher interviews. In one case the researcher had been invited to the college, by the Principal, following piloting of the questionnaire. The researcher visited the other colleges and sought the Principal's permission in each case. All three Principals were enthused by the study and provided contact details for teachers whom they believed would be interested in participating. The researcher contacted each teacher by telephone and explained the nature and purpose of the study. In line with the ethical code suggested by Cohen, Manion and Morrison teachers were given the option of refusing to participate if they so wished (2000: 71). Only one teacher[1] took this option. The teacher interviews were taped, with one exception, where notes were taken, as the teacher was not comfortable with the use of the recorder. In total four teachers were interviewed.

Finding employers willing to give interviews proved problematic. Many employers seem to be unaware of whether employees completed LCA or Leaving Certificate Established. However employers who are aware of both Leaving Certificates were happy to participate and four were interviewed. These interviews were also taped, as was the interview with the LCA Coordinator in the school.

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[1] She believed she did not have sufficient experience of teaching LCA graduates.

All of the participants were made fully aware that the research would be analysed by the researcher for a Master of Education thesis in NUI, Maynooth. All[1] were assured that coding would be used in the presentation of findings to ensure the anonymity of all participants. This is in line with the advice in the literature: "The essence of anonymity is that information provided by participants should in no way reveal their identity" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000: 61).

3.13 The Interview Guide

An interview guide was used in conducting the interviews:

> An interview guide is a list of questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of an interview. An interview guide is prepared to make sure that essentially the same information is obtained from a number of people by covering the same material (Quinn Patton, 1987: 111).

While the questions were decided in advance the researcher followed the advice of Bogdan and Biklen and was prepared to let go of the plan and 'jump on the opportunities' the interviews presented (2003: 97). Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias also stress the value of this approach as it gives respondents 'considerable liberty' to express their views (1996: 234). King et al. (1987) recognise the possibilities for the interviewer of being free to pursue interesting responses. One disadvantage to this approach is that more work and time is involved in coding and analysing data. However the researcher prioritised a format which was likely to produce high quality data.

3.14 Documentary Evidence

Some documentary evidence was used in conducting this research. Permission was

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[1] As there is only one coordinator involved in the research it was impossible to guarantee anonymity therefore the Coordinator's permission was sought before any quotes or references were used from the interview.

sought from the school Principal who granted access to school records including; class lists, attendance registers, enrolment figures, examination results, minutes of meetings and the Staff Handbook.

3.15 Data Analysis

"Qualitative data analysis involves making sense of the data. The task is initially one of sorting the data into manageable units" (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 299). The authors suggest the use of colour coding with highlighter pens as a useful strategy in retrieval and presentation of the data for analysis. The researcher followed this advice. Each interview was played back at the earliest opportunity and was transcribed in its entirety. These transcripts were then read repeatedly and colour coded as themes emerged. As Bell (1999) suggests this approach is very time consuming but the researcher found it very useful in ordering and reducing the data collected. Several categories emerged in this process and due to the limitations of this thesis it was necessary to follow the advice of Bogdan and Biklen: "... analysis is a process of data reduction. Decisions to limit codes are imperative" (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003: 173/174).

On analysis of the questionnaires the advice of Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (1996) was followed: "Many small scale research studies which use questionnaires as a form of data collection will not need to go beyond the use of descriptive statistics and the exploration of interrelationships between pairs of variables" (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 1996: 194). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) agree that where surveys are small, coding is done by hand. As this thesis fits the category of a 'small scale

research study' the researcher followed this advice. A combination of pie charts and bar charts are used to graphically present questionnaire findings as the author agrees with the view that graphic illustration can be a very effective means of communication: "By using graphs to create a visual impression of the data researchers can often communicate information more effectively" (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1996: 359).

3.16 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the objectives of the research and the methodologies used in its execution. Attention has been paid to the researcher's concerns with ethical issues and the danger of researcher bias.

The research findings are presented in detail in Chapter Four.

Chapter Four

Findings of the Case Study Research

4.1 Response

Of the 42 questionnaires circulated 33 were returned. This represents a return rate of 78%, which was highly satisfactory considering that some of the graduates[1] are out of school for up to seven years. The lowest return rate was from the class of 1998 with only one of six questionnaires returned from this group. This may be partly explained by the fact that a number of these graduates no longer live at home – two questionnaires were returned, incomplete, by parents with a note to this effect. It is also possible that because this group were the first to complete LCA in the case study school their experience of the programme may have been less positive than later groups – a point suggested by the LCA Coordinator in interview. A total of 16 male and 17 female graduates returned completed questionnaires (Figure 4.1).
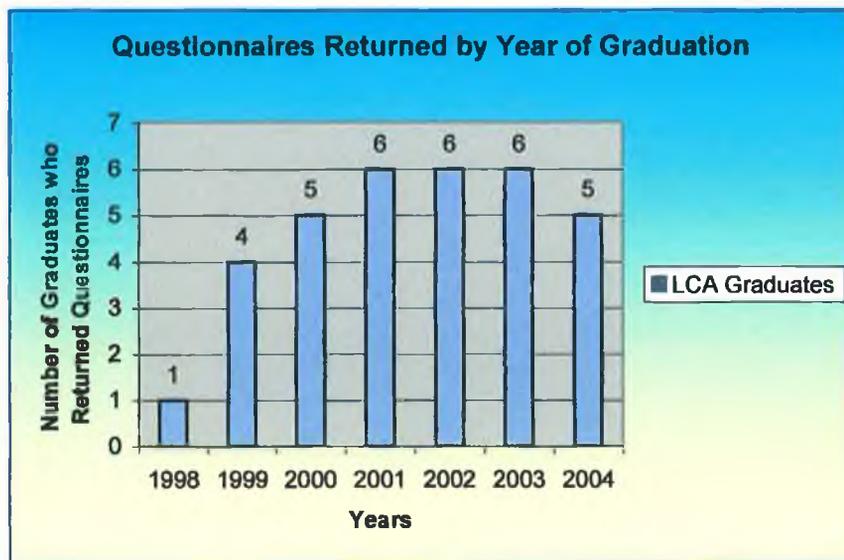
Figure 4.1   *(N=33)*

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[1] For the purpose of clarity the respondents will be referred to as graduates as all have completed the LCA programme.

4.2 LCA as a Senior Cycle Option

4.2.1 Reasons for Choosing the LCA Programme

The opportunity to do work experience is a major attraction with 48.4% of graduates

listing it among their reasons for choosing LCA (Figure 4.2).

Reasons for Choosing LCA
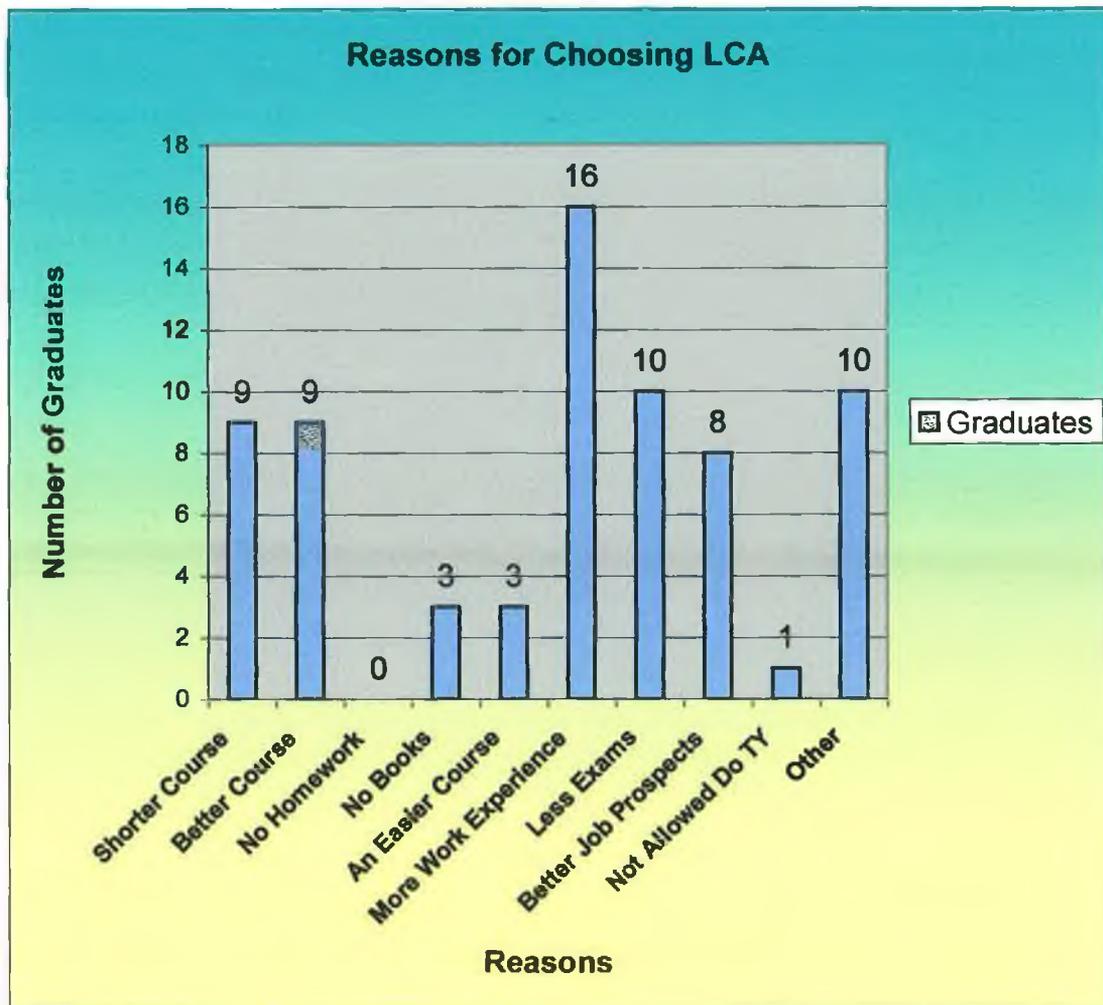
Figure 4.2   *(N=33)*

This evidence was corroborated by the interview findings.

> *Susan was telling me all about LCA. She said the work experience is*
> *absolutely brilliant.*
>   *(20 year old, female)*

I couldn't wait to get out of school anyway and the idea of a two year course where you got to go out to work four times seemed great.
(23 year old, male)

Having 'less exams' to do was also an important factor for students when choosing LCA. This finding is supported by the coordinator who sees the lack of an all-determining terminal examination as a big attraction for what he described as 'the less academic student'.

There's no exams at the end of the year that's probably the first thing they said to us.
(21 year old, female)

The attraction of LCA was that exams only made up one third of your marks.
(18 year old, male)

In the case study school LCA is a shorter course – two year – than Leaving Certificate Established, which incorporates TY and is a three year course. This factor also appeals to students and was listed by 27.2% of graduates as a reason for choosing the course. This is not an unexpected finding as LCA is recommended to students whose commitment to a three-year senior cycle is questionable.

The high value placed on LCA in the case study school is demonstrated by the fact that 27.2% of graduates list it as a 'Better Course' in their responses. Interestingly 24.2% saw LCA as offering better job prospects. This may be because students who are less academically inclined see LCA as more relevant to their career paths. This point emerged a number of times in the interviews and was summed up by one graduate:

The other Leaving is fine if you want to be a doctor or go to university. I wanted to do an apprenticeship and with the work experience and everything I knew LCA would be better.
(21 year old, male)

Surprisingly no graduate included 'no homework' as a reason for choosing LCA and only 9% choose LCA as an 'easier course'. This may suggest that students are not looking for an easier option but rather one which better suits their abilities. If this is so it is consistent with the aims of LCA and is evidence that the programme is achieving one of its goals:

> The Leaving Certificate Applied is intended to meet the needs of those participants who are not adequately catered for by the other Leaving Certificate programmes or who choose not to opt for such programmes.
> (DES/NCCA, 2000: 8)

Other reasons given for choosing LCA included: 'it suited my ability better', 'more practical', 'never good at school' and 'could never study'. Similar responses emerged from the interviews:

> *Junior cycle was so boring, like History and Geography and Irish. I knew I couldn't sit in class and be bored any more. I wasn't going back if I didn't get into LCA.*
> *(21 year old, female)*

These comments are consistent with students choosing a more practical, active course.

4.2.2 Student Choice in Opting for LCA
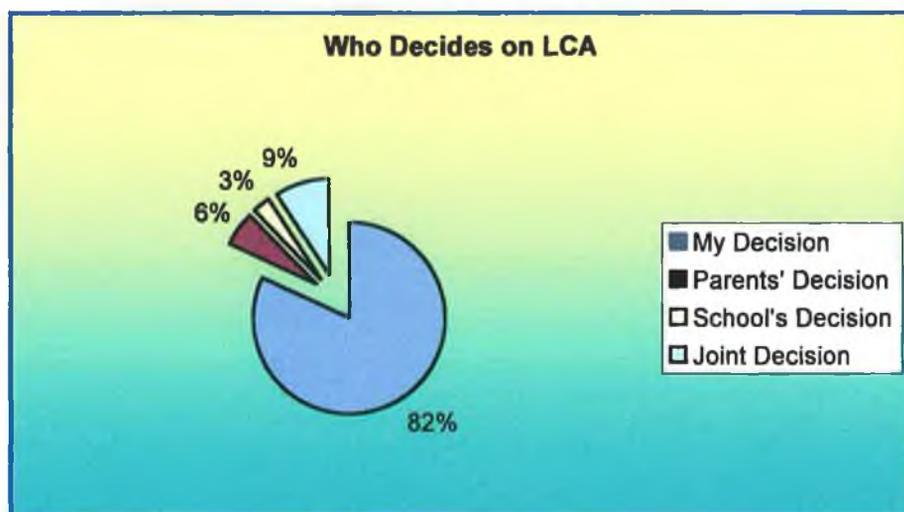
Figure 4.3   *(N=33)*

On the issue of who makes the decision for the student to do LCA 84.8% of graduates identified the decision as their own (Figure 4.3). Just one graduate ticked all three options and saw the decision as a joint decision between the school, his parents and himself. This would appear to be the ideal situation; unfortunately other graduates did not share the experience.

Two female graduates saw the decision as their parents' rather than their own. One male respondent regarded the decision as the school's alone. He included the following comment to register his dissatisfaction with the situation: 'I was sort of pressurised into doing the LCA course'.

The area of student choice in opting for LCA was explored further in the focus group interviews. All of the interviewees were adamant that all students should be allowed take their senior cycle option of choice. They argued that the school should advise students on the more appropriate course for their ability. However, where the student did not accept this advice he/she should be allowed to pursue the Leaving Certificate of his/her choice.

> *There were one or two people who said they had no option. I don't think that was fair irrespective of what they had done in Junior Cert. They felt they were capable of doing the normal Leaving Cert. and I don't see why the school should have prevented them.*
> *(19 year old, male)*

One girl felt very strongly that where students are unable to make the decision or are contemplating leaving, the school should intervene and make the decision if necessary:

> *I'm glad they made the decision for me. I couldn't have made the decision. I have an education now.*
> *(20 year old, female)*

The difficulty of making such a big decision at an early age was also a concern.

> *It's still very hard to know what you want to do at that stage. You're still very young and you just don't know what you want to do.*
> *(23 year old, female)*

4.2.3 Advice on LCA as a Senior Cycle Option

The quantitative data from the questionnaires reveals that while the majority of graduates did receive advice on LCA as an option for senior cycle, 36.3% of respondents reported receiving no advice (Figure 4.4). This is a significant number given that such an important decision must be made at a relatively young age.

Percentage of Graduates who Received Advice on LCA as a Senior Cycle Option

36%

64%

■ Yes
■ No
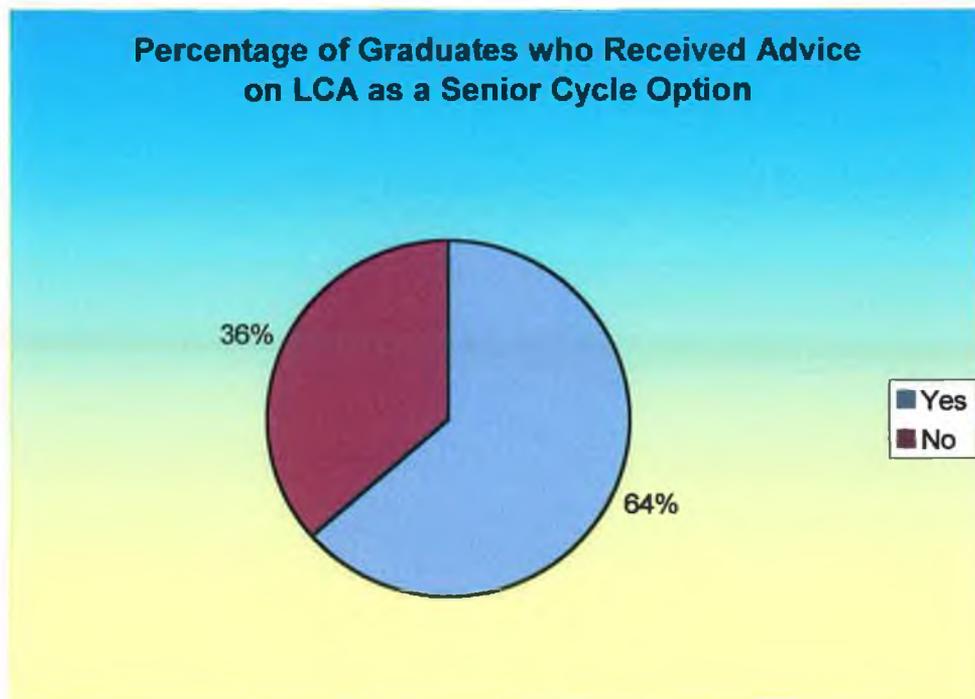
Figure 4.4 *(N=33)*

Of those who did receive advice it originated from several sources. Chief among these was the third year head from which 57.1% of respondents claimed to have received advice. Parents were rated next with 47.6% of graduates having received parental advice. Significantly all of this group come from the early and middle years

of the study with no graduate from the last two years of the study having received parental advice. On exploring this issue with the coordinator, in interview, it would appear that parents were particularly well informed of the programme in the early years. As parents and students became more familiar with LCA less emphasis was placed on promotion of the programme. The fact that no parents have been involved in helping the students choose LCA over the past two years suggests that the school needs to be much more proactive in promoting LCA at this point.

When asked how parents felt about students opting for LCA in senior cycle the results are encouraging for a number of reasons (Figure 4.5). Firstly no parent is listed in the

Parents' Response to Graduates Choosing LCA
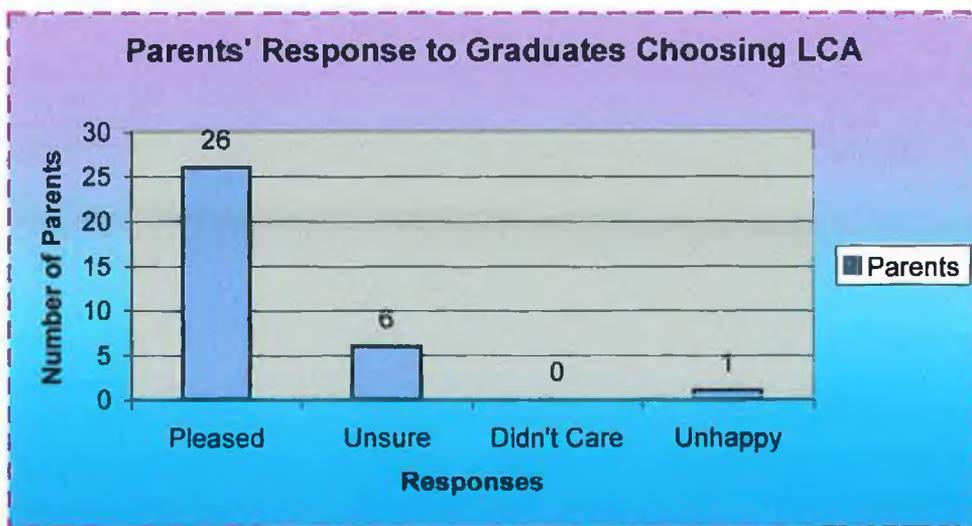
Figure 4.5   *(N=33)*

category of 'Didn't Care'. This is significant, as research has shown that parental involvement can play a crucial role in a child's education (Lareau[1], 1989; Lyons et

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[1] Lareau (1989) found that parents' capacity to intervene in educational matters on behalf of their children has the potential to radically alter the nature of their children's education.

al.[1], 2003). Parental involvement was noted by the coordinator as a critical factor in determining students' application to the course and ultimately in determining their success or otherwise.

> *We have got some very difficult, unmotivated students through this course. Some of them have got merits and distinctions. That's a huge achievement. It happened because their parents supported us and believed in what we were doing.*
>
> *(LCA coordinator)*

Of the 18% of parents who were unsure about the choice of course half came from the 2004 cohort. This is further evidence that parents are less involved than in previous years.

Not surprisingly friends/peers rate highly as a source of advice and information on LCA (Figure 4.6).
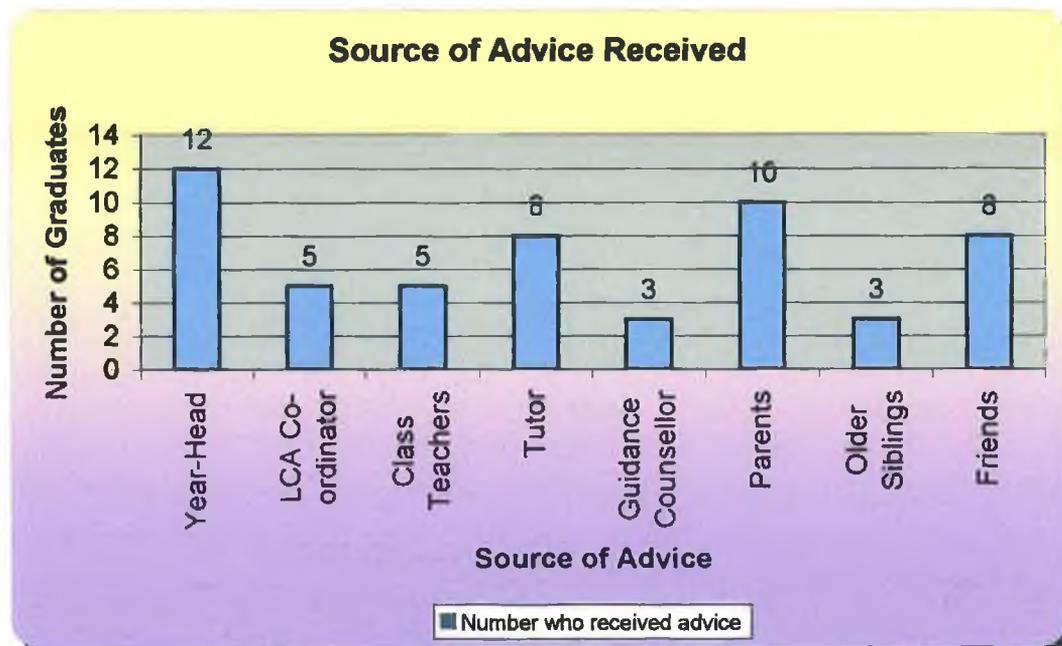
Figure 4.6   *(N=33)*

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[1] Lyons et al. found in their research on the teaching of Mathematics that 'parents are key players in the education game' (2003: 355).

In the interviews a number of graduates agreed that friends, particularly those already in LCA, were a very useful source of advice and information. Very high value was placed on this information, as they knew these people had 'insider' knowledge:

> *Yeah the girls in 5LCA were always telling us about it. It sounded great with all the tasks and trips and work experience and everything. They said it was more active you were always doing something not just sitting in class bored.*
> *(21 year old, female)*

Class tutors also rated highly as a source of advice with 38% of graduates having received advice from them. This figure is consistent with the high value placed on the tutor system in the case study school.

Given that 85.7% of the graduates who remembered receiving advice on LCA as a senior cycle option identified at least one of their sources as a school source, questions arise as to the validity of the response of the 36.3% who claim to have received no advice. On exploring this issue in the focus group interviews graduates suggested that information had been provided in group forums. There was disagreement as to whether this constituted advice or was 'merely information'. While some graduates clearly remembered being spoken to individually by the year head, the tutor, or the class teacher others did not receive individual advice.

> *The school did not tell me enough. No, not at all.*
> *(21 year old female)*

> *You need far more advice on what LCA allows you to do after you finish.*
> *(19 year old, female)*

*In third year you don't know what you want to do so the information could
have been a bit more in depth. Everyone should be sat down and spoken to so
they know exactly.*

(21 year old, male)

These people firmly believe that each LCA applicant should be spoken to,
individually, and advised as to the suitability of LCA for him/her as a Leaving
Certificate option.

4.3 Progression

4.3.1 Progression to Further Education/Training

The quantitative data from the questionnaires demonstrates that a high percentage of
both male (76.4%) and female (81.25%) graduates have furthered their education
since leaving second level (Figure 4.7). This statistic should help allay some of the
fears of parents who believe that LCA does not offer progression to further education.
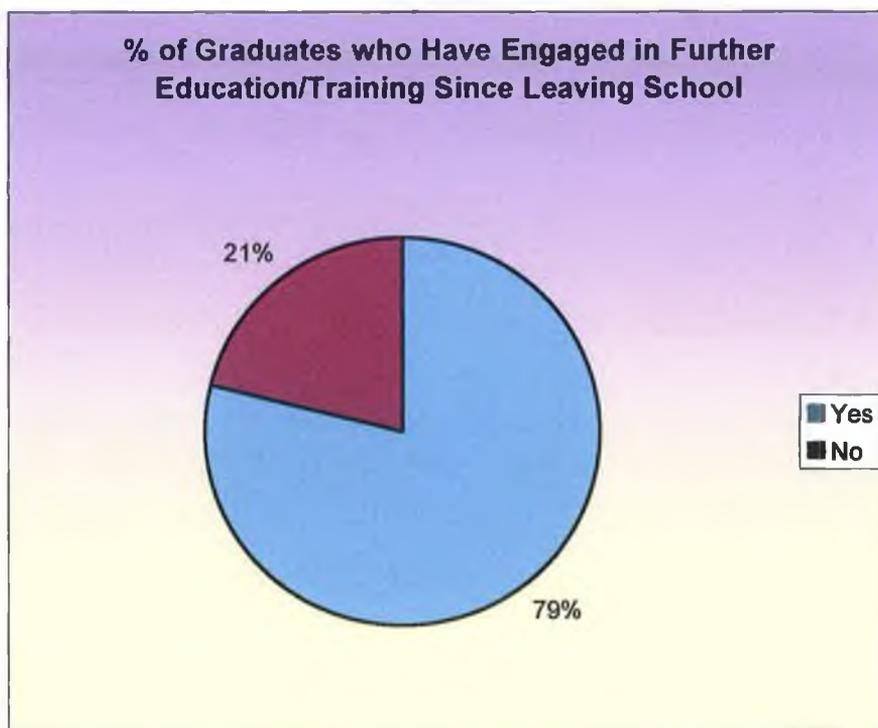
Figure 4.7   *(N=33)*

4.3.2 Type of Further Education/Training

In identifying the type of further education undertaken by graduates six categories were suggested, namely:

- Post Leaving Certificate Course

- Certificate Course

- Apprenticeship

- Diploma Course

- Degree Course

- Other

Figure 4.8 demonstrates the level of uptake on the various courses:

Further Education/Training Undertaken
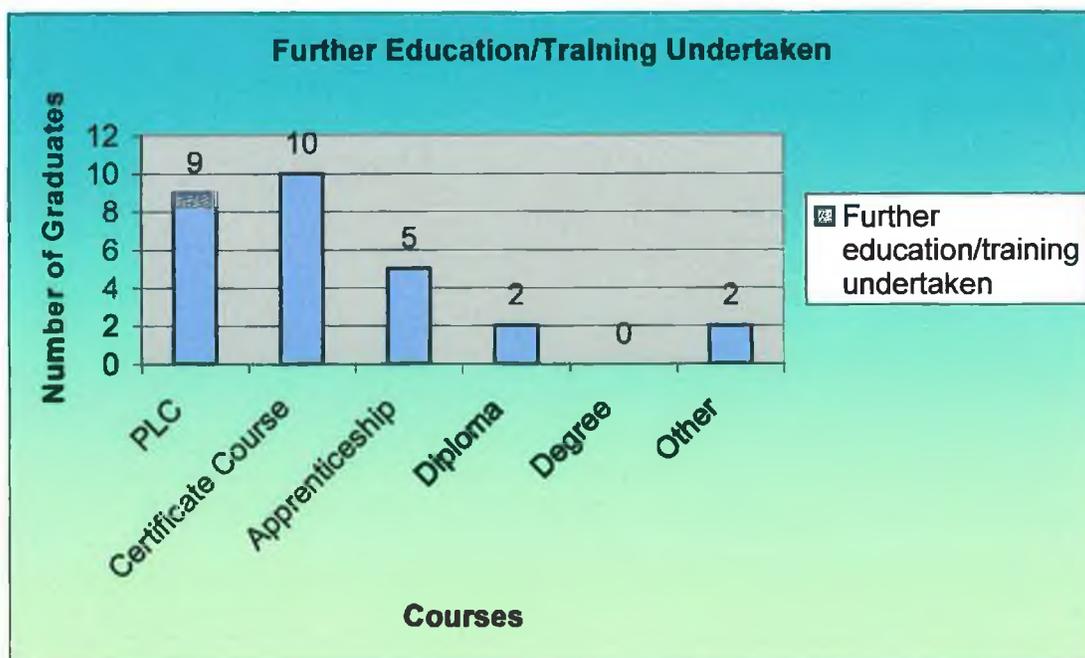
Figure 4.8   *(N=33)*

Certificate courses proved the most popular with 30.3% of graduates having taken at least one certificate course. A total of 12.1% of graduates had taken more than one certificate course while two graduates, one male, one female, had each completed three certificate courses. However none of these courses was at a level higher than FETAC[1] Level 2 and as one teacher commented:

> *Some of them transfer on to another course but still at FETAC Level 2 – it is not progression and I would never recommend it.*
> *(business teacher, third level)*

PLC's were next to certificate courses in popularity having been taken by 27.2% of graduates. Again these were mainly at FETAC Level 2, with just one graduate having progressed to Level 3. Apprenticeships were taken by 15.1% per cent of graduates. Just 2 graduates had completed a diploma course, which raises questions about progression rates to such courses from LCA. This is consistent with the experience of the third level teachers:

> *Very, very few of them make it through to diploma level.*
> *(third level teacher)*

> *FETAC Level 2 is as far as LCA students get and at that very few of them get better than a pass. It is the traditional Leaving Cert. students who achieve the merits and distinctions.*
> *(deputy principal, third level)*

> *In the Business area, over the past two years only one LCA student has made it through to a level higher than FETAC Level 2 and he is really struggling.*
> *(business teacher, third level)*

While it is possible for LCA students to progress to diploma courses in the Institutes of Technology they must first achieve distinctions in at least five[2] modules at FETAC Level 2. All of the teachers interviewed agreed that this is very unusual and none

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[1] FETAC Level 2 is the basic qualification for 1 year Post Leaving Certificate courses.
[2] This number can vary. Many courses demand distinctions in all eight modules.

were able to give an example, from their own classes, of a student who had made this progression. In the light of these findings it is not surprising that none of the thirty-three graduates who responded had undertaken a degree course.

However one graduate had a real issue with this. He was particularly animated that despite completing a FETAC Level 2 Award in Sports and Management, a National Certificate in Exercise and Fitness and a Diploma in Sports and Leisure Management he was unable to gain entry to a third level institution to train to become a Physical Education teacher.

> *I wanted to go and do a degree and become a teacher. I had done my Diploma and my National Cert in Exercise and Fitness. But the colleges didn't recognise LCA, they were turning up their noses. If I'd done the proper Leaving Cert. I'd have got in with the click of a finger. It was very unfair.*
> *(23 year old, male)*

He realized how unfair it was when he applied to six English colleges and five of his applications were successful. This student was clearly hardworking and highly motivated. His experience was frustrating and supports the findings of the NESF (2002), which identified limited access to the third level as a problem for LCA students.

4.3.3 Gender Differences in Participation in Further Education/Training

Some difference was evident in the type of education/training undertaken by males and females. PLC courses were most popular with the male respondents having been taken by 35.2% in contrast to 18.7% by females. Certificate courses were taken by 43.7% of female graduates but were taken by only 17.6% of males. The explanation for this appears to be that many female graduates take certificate courses in the beauty and cosmetics areas. Apprenticeships proved much more popular with male

respondents, 23.5% of whom had undertaken an apprenticeship. In contrast only one female had completed an apprenticeship. This was in hairdressing. However this finding is not surprising given that traditionally areas such as brick laying, plastering, carpentry, plumbing and motor mechanics have been predominantly male occupations in Ireland. Diploma courses were equally distributed between the genders but had been completed by just two students, one male and one female. With such small numbers progressing beyond FETAC Level 2 courses it appears that the prospects of progression in third level are limited for LCA graduates. This concurs with the fears of O Donnabhain[1] (1999).

4.3.4 Poor Literacy and Numeracy a Handicap to Progression

A minority of graduates (19%) suggested in their responses to the questionnaires that the LCA course was too easy. However in the focus group interviews this was a big issue. One graduate felt that this was not explained adequately beforehand:

> *Somebody could have said just how easy it is going to be like. Just to lay down how basic it was.*
> *(19 year old, female)*

Another graduate felt she would have been able for much harder work but she realized others in the class would not:

> *I really wanted to do more Maths and because I wanted to other people in the class were getting frustrated with me. There should be different levels like in the other Leaving.*
> *(23 year old, female)*

This student was aware that the level of Mathematics was appropriate for other students in the class but posed no challenge to her. The coordinator also commented on the low level of Mathematics in LCA:

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[1] O Donnabhain (1999) expressed concern that LCA students may find the barriers in third level too great and may drop out of the formal education system.

The good students find the Maths boring. It shows in the exam, some of them come out really early from Maths.
(LCA coordinator)

The suggestion to provide different levels for students of differing abilities may need to be considered if LCA is to continue to attract more able students. The coordinator was emphatic on the need to attract a percentage of more able students if a good class dynamic is to be created and a good programme offered.

A number of the graduates also found the terminal examinations too easy.

I didn't think the exams were very tough. They should have been a lot harder. I felt a lot of the exams were very, very easy.
(19 year old, male)

You just had to write a one page essay, ... it was stupid, I thought that was too easy. I felt there was no practical use to it.
(20 year old, male)

The low standard of literacy and numeracy is a major issue for the third level teachers. Several references were made to this as the greatest weakness of LCA students.

The traditional Leaving Certificate students are better from an academic point of view. LCAs have a major weakness in literacy and numeracy.
(deputy principal, third level)

This view was echoed by all of the teachers interviewed. Another teacher was even more emphatic and stressed that many LCA graduates cannot cope with PLC courses.

The belief is that PLC courses are ideal for LCA students. But they're not. If there is any literacy or numeracy or any dealing with concepts involved they cannot cope. Literacy is a huge problem. When we find a student who is struggling we check their background and invariably, ten times out of ten, it is an LCA student. I don't believe these students should be encouraged to go to college. It does them no favours.
(third level teacher)

Poor literacy and numeracy is considered a significant handicap in gaining access to what one teacher described as 'our more fancy' courses. Another commented on

LCA graduates performing very well at interview but regretted not being able to offer

them places in certain courses because:

> *They came across extremely well in the interview. Of course I went back and checked up their academic record to support the interview and that's where I found the gaps. If they don't have the mathematical ability I can't take them on.*
>
> *(third level teacher)*

Another third level teacher said that they had discussed offering LCA graduates extra

literacy and numeracy classes. However, they had decided against this:

> *We discussed the pros and cons and we decided that it wouldn't be nice in a college like ours to be 'LCAing' them all over again.*
>
> *(business teacher, third level)*

Alarmingly all of the third level teachers stressed that LCA graduates have very poor

levels of literacy and numeracy. There was consensus that the graduates have very

good communication, computer and presentation skills. However a number of

teachers stressed that these skills cannot compensate for the lack of ability in other

areas. One teacher said that the 'fancy presentation' fails to hide the lack of content.

A number of teachers noted a marked decline in the standard of LCA graduate over

the past number of years. One suggested that many secondary schools are now

encouraging students with learning difficulties to pursue the LCA programme and

these students then enrol in PLC courses and find them too difficult.

> *These students work well under supervision but they cannot cope on their own. They cannot structure sentences; their spelling is very poor. It's unfair to these people to send them to third level. They need to find jobs, which suit their particular skills. Struggling here does nothing for their self esteem.*
>
> *(third level teacher)*

This teacher has real worries about the future of LCA if this trend continues. While

less emphatic than the teacher above, the LCA Coordinator in the case study school

has also witnessed a decline in the standard of student taking the programme in recent

years.   He fears this trend may damage the status of the programme and may discourage more able students from enrolling in LCA.

The development of literacy and numeracy skills is listed as a primary objective of LCA (DES/NCCA, 2000). These findings suggest that this objective is currently not being met.

4.3.5 Selection of PLC Courses

Some of the third level teachers certainly believe that there is a place for LCA graduates in PLC courses but they stress that the courses need to be carefully selected. Skills based courses, computer courses (which do not involve programming), and vocationally orientated courses were all suggested as suitable. One teacher suggested that FETAC Level 2 courses designed to provide work skills for areas such as childcare and banking are hugely beneficial to LCA graduates.

> *These courses provide them with real work skills which they will use. They give them an advantage in the work place. They are a good choice for LCA students.*
>
> *(third level teacher)*

A number of the teachers commented on the difference in standard of students who have achieved a merit or distinction in LCA. One teacher suggested that invariably when they check the files they find that the LCA students who are doing well have achieved a distinction.

> *The people who come out of LCA with a merit or a distinction do much better. Many of the others sink.*
>
> *(business teacher, third level)*

The coordinator supports this contention and sees a big difference in standard between the students who achieve high grades and those who 'just' pass.

4.3.6 Completion in Further Education

All of the third level teachers interviewed agreed that the dropout rate among LCA graduates is noticeably higher than among the Leaving Certificate Established students. One teacher gave an example of a class where the tutor was absent through illness for a long period. Several students left the course during the tutor's absence. On checking the origins of these students it was discovered that the majority of the dropouts were LCA graduates. Another teacher commented:

> *I'm amazed at how many of them leave the courses. They don't seem to be able to cope when they have difficulty.*
> *(third level teacher)*

This is a disappointing finding. Gleeson and Granville (1996) argue that it is indefensible to offer LCA students learning experiences which allow them to savour success, if their certification has little value in the market place. It is also indefensible to allow them progress to PLC courses that they find too difficult and fail to complete. These students need a greater level of support to take them through third level education than is currently provided.

4.4 Employment Status of Graduates

The current employment status of the graduates is very encouraging. Firstly, no graduate is unemployed and while the current buoyant economic climate must be taken into account this is nevertheless a very positive finding (Table 4.1, below: 83). Also 75.7% describe their position as permanent. Another very encouraging finding is that only one graduate is in a Semi-Skilled/Unskilled occupation. Skilled Manual occupations account for 36.3% of graduates. These comprise mainly of people who have completed apprenticeships or have trained as machine operators. A further 27.2% are in the Intermediate Non-Manual category. These include office administrators, sales consultants and telephone operators. One male graduate owns

his own flooring company and employs six people while one female graduate manages a café. The Lower Professional category accounts for 18.1% of graduates and includes bank officials, a fitness instructor and a number of special needs assistants. Two female candidates are listed as 'Other', both are working part-time, one of whom is pregnant and hoping to return to education.

Current Employment Status of Graduates
(Categories Adapted from Gorby et al. 2003)

Socio economic Status	Male	Female	Total
Farmer/Agriculture	0	0	0
H/L Professional	2	4	6
Employer/Manager	1	1	2
Intermediate/ Other Non-Manual	4	5	9
Skilled Manual	8	4	12
Semi-skilled/ Unskilled Manual	1	0	1
In Education	1	0	1
Other	0	2	2
Unemployed	0	0	0
Total number	17	16	33

Table 4.1   (N=33)

These findings suggest that LCA graduates are quite successful in the labour market and do not settle for low skilled occupations. This evidence was supported in the focus groups where the majority of interviewees expressed satisfaction with their employment status:

I always wanted to work in sales and now I am.
(19 year old female)

No matter what Leaving I done I always wanted to be a plumber.
(20 year old male)

I love my job and I got it through Office Skills in LCA. That was the very best part of the course.
(18 year old female)

The success of the graduates in the labour market is consistent with the high value they place on work experience. With 50% of graduates currently employed in an area related to a work experience placement it appears that this element of the course is making a real contribution in helping them choose careers.

One disappointing finding here is that only one graduate is in full time education but this is consistent with the finding that no graduate has progressed to further education in the past two years.

4.5 How LCA is Perceived

4.5.1 Is LCA Seen as a 'Real' Leaving Certificate?

A major concern around LCA, from its inception, has been the fear that it would not be given parity of esteem with the established Leaving Certificate (O Donnabhain[1], 1999). Regrettably the quantitative data from the questionnaires suggests that the perception of LCA continues to be problematic with 87% of respondents having heard LCA described as 'not a real Leaving Certificate.'

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[1] O Donnabhain (1999) suggests that LCA does have an image problem because of its target group and its limited progression routes.

Whom have you heard Describe LCA as not a 'Real' Leaving Certificate?
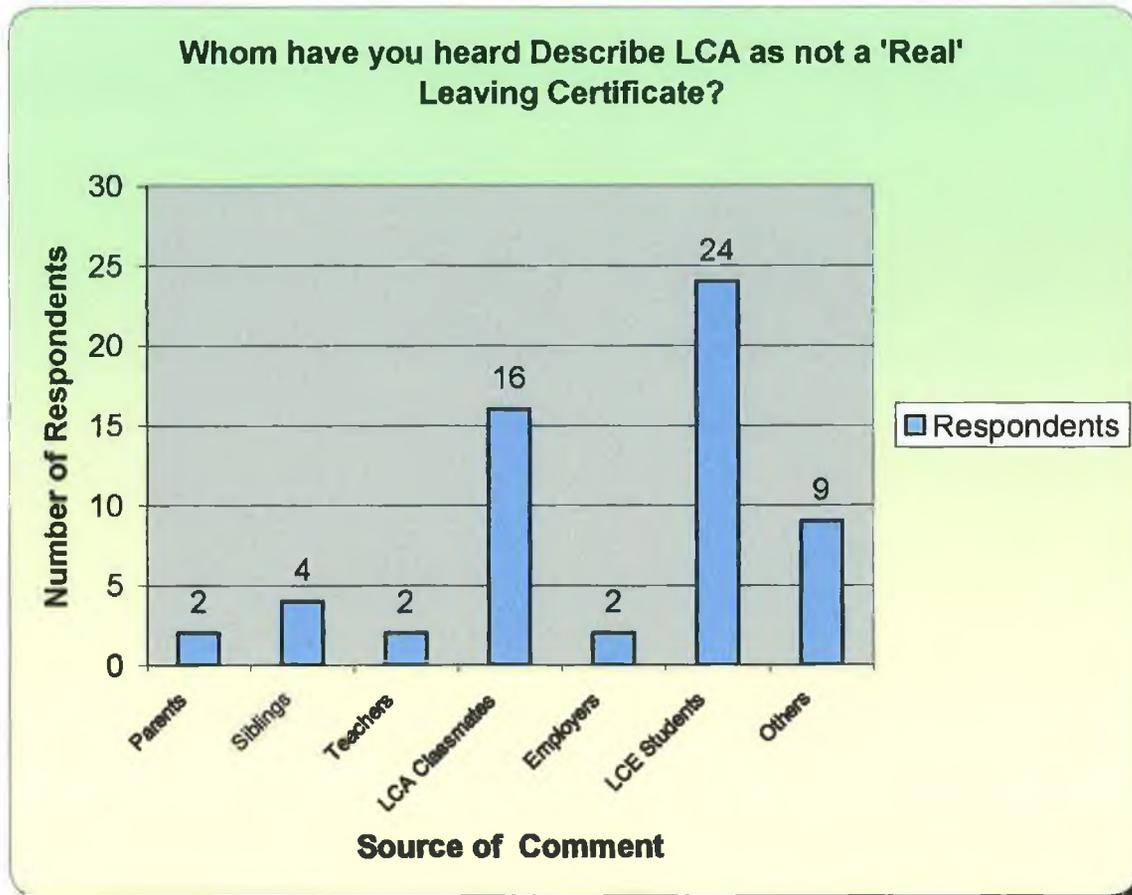
Figure 4.9   *(N=33)*

4.5.2 Leaving Certificate Established Students

In the case study school Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) students, are the main offenders with 72% of respondents having heard them describe LCA as 'not real'(Figure 4.9). This supports the findings of Crowley (2002) who found that LCA students complained about negative comments from their friends. On exploring this issue further in the focus groups it emerged that this is an area of real concern and hurt for LCA students. There appears to be a low level but consistent problem of

derogatory comments which students experience in the corridors, at break time and in extra curricular activities:

> *Like LCA 'Losers Can't Apply', yeah you'd often get that from the normal 6th years if you were going into a classroom and they were coming out. Especially when we went into the black uniforms[1] in sixth year.*
> *(23 year old, male)*

> *Other sixth years were very intimidating. They'd say, 'what are you doing with us? We're doing the Leaving Cert'.*
> *(20 year old, female)*

A serious problem appears to exist around activities where students from both the Established and the Applied Leaving Certificates are grouped together. One group referred to a school tour to France where they felt ostracised by the 'other' Leaving Certificate students. Two separate groups evolved with no positive interaction occurring.

> *In Paris they stayed at the top of the bus and didn't associate with us once.*
> *(21 year old, female)*

The LCA students were happy that they had a good trip and gave much credit to their tutor whom they felt 'stood up for us'. However they were very unhappy with the 'condescending' attitude of the Leaving Certificate Established students.

4.5.3 Sixth Year Graduation

Another area of inequality, which emerged in the study, is the sixth year graduation. This is a high profile, celebratory occasion in the case study school. However the LCA graduates report experiencing the event as 'second class citizens.' On exploring this issue with the coordinator he believes the school 'makes a real effort' to ensure that LCA students are fully involved in the occasion but adds:

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[1] In the case study school sixth year students are allowed to wear black jumpers in recognition of their senior status. All other students wear a green jumper.

They come from different groups and different classes and so they have
different memories of school. Of course you treat them all the same but you
cannot force them to be one group.
(LCA Coordinator)

One aspect of this occasion that may impact negatively on how LCA students experience the night relates to the post graduation celebration. Traditionally the organising committee books a function room. As LCA graduates are on average, one year younger[1] many of them fail to gain admission. They find this a very degrading experience.

They were all 18 and they knew we had no ID. It was like under 18's don't get
in, so go home. They didn't even refund our money. We were very put down
by that.
(20 year old, female)

There was a pre-debs on and we didn't get invited. They said you're not in
any of our classes, you're not really the Leaving Certs. I heard someone say
we shouldn't be going to the debs either. I even had friends in Leaving Cert.
and they felt the same.
(23 year old, female)

These findings suggest that much work needs to be done in the school to make the graduation an occasion of equality for all.

4.5.4 How LCA Students Perceive LCA

LCA students, themselves, are reported by 48% of respondents as referring to LCA as not real. However the focus groups did not see this as a problem and referred to it as merely 'messing.' It is likely that the comment was seen as less offensive as it came from a peer.

4.5.5 Teacher Perception of LCA

Just 6% of respondents report having heard parents or siblings refer to LCA as

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[1] Because LCA students do not complete TY they are on average one year younger than the Leaving Certificate Established students.

'not real'. However a matter of concern for the school is that a similar number of respondents report having heard teachers describe LCA as 'not real.' This must be hurtful to students and can only serve to undermine the programme in the college. On pursuing the issue in the focus group interviews it would appear that this experience is isolated.

> *Just one or two teachers made you feel youse are the students who didn't bother in Junior so let's throw them all into LCA and we'll get them through it. They didn't encourage us. But most teachers were proud of us and very encouraging. Even teachers you'd just meet in the corridors. That was very encouraging.*
> *(21 year old, female)*

> *I think some teachers felt it was a bit of an inconvenience for them. I can think of just one who wasn't interested.*
> *(19 year old, male)*

> *A lot of teachers here put their heart and soul into it. They put everything in even on days when we didn't want to.*
> *(20 year old, female)*

Overall it would appear that teachers are very positive towards the LCA programme and the LCA students. However any deviance from this is a matter of concern and needs attention.

4.5.6 Employer Perception of LCA

One of the difficulties encountered in interviewing employers about LCA was that many said they had no idea which Leaving Certificate their employees had completed. This can be viewed in a positive light and may suggest that LCA graduates receive parity of esteem in the workplace. Conversely it may confirm that employer ignorance of LCA is indeed prevalent.

One employer who takes many female students on work experience noted:

A lot of LCA students don't work off initiative, you tell them what to do and they will do it very well but they don't work off initiative.
(retail employer)

Another employer who has taken on a number of LCA graduates reinforced this view:

Well you can see that they are maybe ... more intellectually challenged and maybe they're just slower to get things. They just lack that little bit of cop on at reading a situation.
(business employer)

However both employers believe that LCA graduates are good workers and are not hesitant to get 'stuck in'.

Probably most importantly they're not afraid to get stuck in and get their hands dirty, they're workers. And that's what you need.
(business employer)

Another employer who takes both LCA students and TY students on work experience noted a difference in their approach to the placement:

We would probably have more difficulty with TY students because they don't know where they are going, some times the placement is an easy option for them. Whereas the LCA student wants to know how the office works. They may not have it refined down to a single point but they want to know how things work. It's probably fair to say they want to get more out of their work experience.
(professional employer)

Many of the graduates see the acquisition of people skills as one of their main gains from LCA. This area was also highlighted by one of the employers who take both LCA and TY students on work experience. She sees LCA students as more mature than their TY counterparts. This may reflect the experience gained in completing tasks and doing interviews.

LCA students are a little more mature. You see it in customers' service. An LCA student will deal with a customer whereas a TY student is more likely to say 'Julie that woman wants you'.
(retail employer)

Three of the employers interviewed observed that if LCA graduates are employed on a part time basis they would readily leave college if offered full time employment. In contrast they point out that Leaving Certificate Established students are much less likely to forfeit a college place.

> *Two girls who are here now, they started on work experience. They were excellent, really into the job so we gave them part time jobs. Then they were going to college but jobs came up and they decided to stay. If an LCA student gets a job they tend to stay where a normal Leaving Cert. will work part time and go to college as well.*
> *(retail employer)*

This seems to support the experience of the Colleges of Further Education who find a much higher dropout rate among LCA students.

> *I'm amazed at how many of them leave the course. Yeah the dropout among the LCAs is definitely higher.*
> *(business teacher)*

However it must be borne in mind that from an employer's perspective it may well be advantageous if these students take up full time positions, as they are already familiar with the business.

4.5.7 Graduates' Perception of LCA

Graduates were asked to comment on how they feel now about their decision to do LCA. Figure 4.10 shows their response:
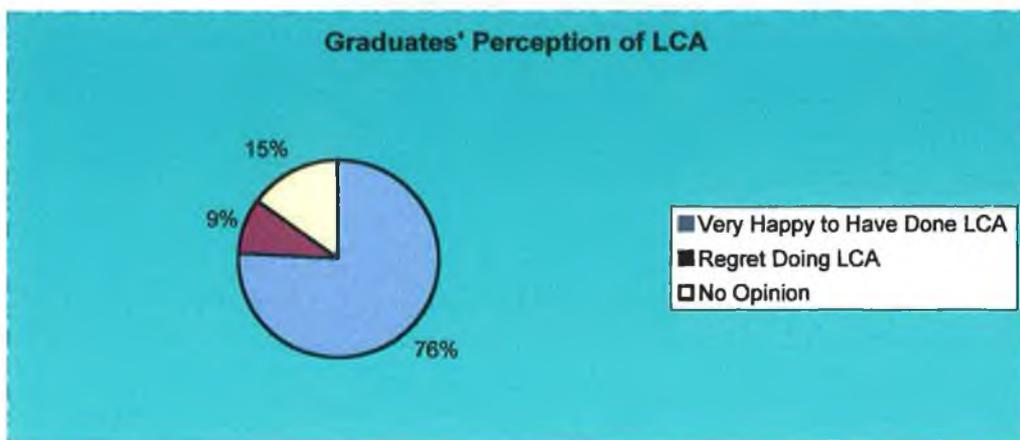
Figure 4.10   *(N=33)*

The results here appear highly satisfactory with only a minority (9%) regretting their decision to do LCA. One could not envisage 100% satisfaction with any programme offered[1]. Four of the five graduates who do not express an opinion have graduated in the last two years. It is likely that when their career paths progress they will have more definite views. Overall it is very encouraging that so many LCA graduates are happy with their Leaving Certificate.

4.6 Adult and Working Life

4.6.1 Preparation for Adult and Working Life

One of the key principles of the LCA Draft Programme Statement was the preparation of students for adult and working life (DES/NCCA, 1995). When asked if LCA was achieving this objective 87.8% of respondents said yes (Figure 4.11). They included comments such as: 'LCA gave me communication and interpersonal skills' and 'it gave valuable people skills'. Three of the 4 (12.1%) graduates who said no were female, this indicates a more negative response from females respondents.
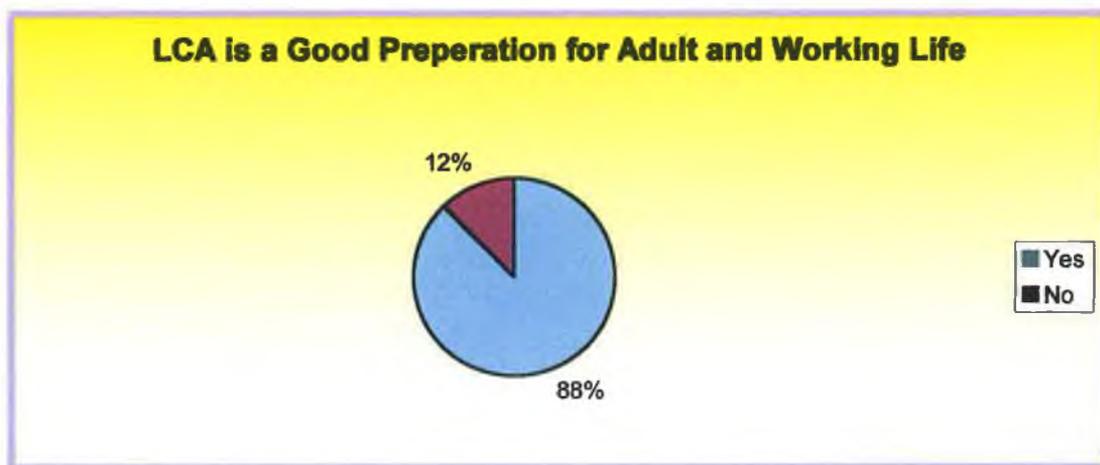
Figure 4.11   *(N=33)*

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[1] Prior to the introduction of LCA Hannan and Shortall (1991) found that many Leaving Certificate Established students were unhappy with the quality of their education.

4.6.2 Communication and Interpersonal Skills

The acquisition of what they term 'people skills' was identified by many of the interviewees as the main gain from LCA. They talked of improved communication and interpersonal skills, gained they believe, from the tasks and the interviews.

> *I think the interviews gave me skills, you know, eye contact, communicating, sitting down talking to someone.*
>
> *(23 year old, male)*

> *LCA taught us how to talk on the phone, we had to do interviews for loads of things, tasks, work experience, for Vocational Prep.*
>
> *(19 year old, female)*

> *Communication skills were big in LCA they thought us an awful lot about that.*
>
> *(21 year old, male)*

Improved confidence featured in the feedback from the questionnaires and the researcher attempted to probe the source of this in the interviews. Graduates spoke of the advantages of the smaller class groups in LCA. They spoke of much improved relations with their teachers. This they believe helped them to become involved in their own learning:

> *Miss must have been knackered by the end of the day. In Junior you'd just leave it if you didn't know something but in LCA you'd want to know and you'd ask.*
>
> *(23 year old, female)*

They also enjoyed experiencing success in completing tasks and they enjoyed discovering skills they had not previously used in school.

> *I found all these dormant skills of organisation and time management and working with people and obtaining sponsorship and writing letters and using the computer and designing posters. A huge amount of skills you used in doing that task, practical skills.*
>
> *(23 year old male)*

This supports the contention of Gleeson and Granville (1996) that LCA rewards a broader range of intelligences and skills than does the narrow focus of the academic

curriculum. Interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences as identified by Gardner (1983) feature in the graduates' appraisal of LCA.

> *The people skills I learned are invaluable to me. They're priceless really. When you have customers paying 20,000 for a floor you don't want to be shaking like a leaf and talking too much and making yourself look like an idiot.*
>
> *(21 year old, male)*

> *Doing the interviews is brilliant for your confidence. So are the tasks and work experience.*
>
> *(19 year old, male)*

> *The thing I think was the dynamic within the class. Looking at the way groups within the class worked. Now looking at a work situation or looking at a club meeting, or if you go to a training workshop and you look at the dynamic and you see the way people are working. I think that was probably the most valuable skill I learned in LCA.*
>
> *(23 year old, male)*

These students are acquiring, through LCA, what Bourdieu (1996) terms 'social capital'[1]. Acquisition of such capital is equipping students with valuable life long skills which should prove very beneficial. The Programme Statement states that LCA places a premium on the 'personal and social development' of participants (DES/NCCA, 2000: 8). These findings suggest that it is achieving this objective.

4.6.3 Organisational Skills

The graduates also recognised that they have acquired organisational skills in LCA. They discovered this in college, where they found that they were much more adept at completing projects than their Leaving Certificate Established peers.

> *We were better at performing tasks, our time management, our organisational skills, our putting stuff together. The Leaving Cert. people needed a lot of tuition. We definitely felt advantaged.*
>
> *(23 year old, female)*

---

[1] Honneth (in Robbins, 2000) describes social capital as the 'quality and quantity' of social relations. Possession of social capital can enable one to enhance one's position by gaining access to social networks.

This finding was supported by the third level teachers interviewed who saw LCA students as more skilled in laying out and presenting projects.

> *Every one of the LCA students presented the project as requested, including their grades whereas the Leaving Certs. could not.*
> *(business teacher)*

> *Their presentation is excellent, really excellent. That is one skill they certainly take from LCA.*
> *(third level teacher)*

Some of the girls were very proud that their PLC teacher was so impressed with their work that she used it as a template to teach the class.

> *Our teachers were amazed and showed the whole class and learnt from us and then taught the whole class that way.*
> *(19 year old, female)*

> *She took my project and showed the whole class. I was chuffed.*
> *(21 year old, female)*

These students were very conscious of their own skills and were fully aware that they had acquired them in LCA. It reinforced their belief that LCA had been a very good choice for them.

4.6.4 Attendance

In the case study school the 90% attendance requirement has been strictly adhered to and appears to have a very positive impact on student attendance. This is not a universal experience[1].

---

[1] The DES (2000) found that some schools were reluctant to apply the 90% attendance requirement strictly as they felt that that it would have a negative impact on retention.

Attendance in LCA

21%
6%
73%

- Better than in Junior Cert.
- Worse than in Junior Cert.
- The same as in Junior Cert.
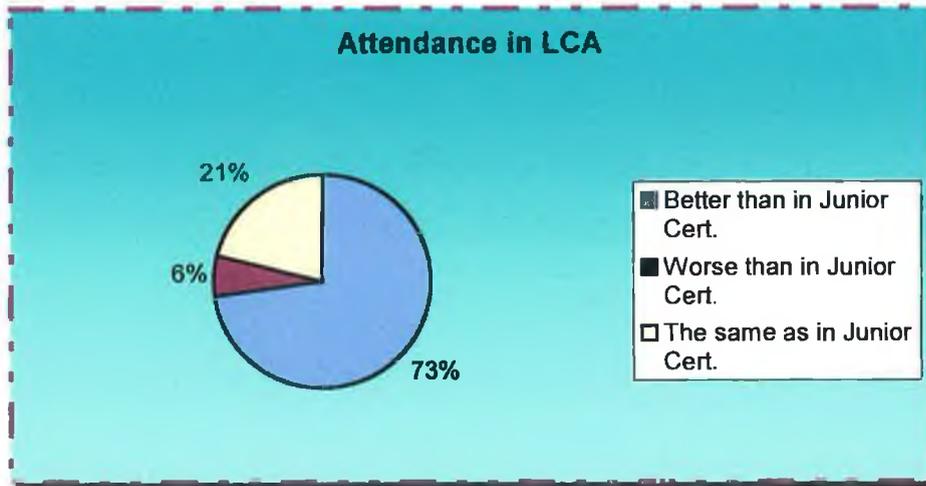
Figure 4.12   *(N=33)*

The quantitative data from the questionnaires demonstrates that students' attendance is much better in LCA than in junior cycle with 72.7% of graduates reporting that their attendance improved (Figure 4.12). Another 21.2% saw their attendance as 'the same', but this included two students who had always achieved 100% attendance and had no room for improvement. Only 6% of respondents reported that their attendance was worse in LCA. These results suggest that the attendance policy is good and is working for the vast majority of students.

90% Attendance Requirement Fair or Unfair?

9%
91%
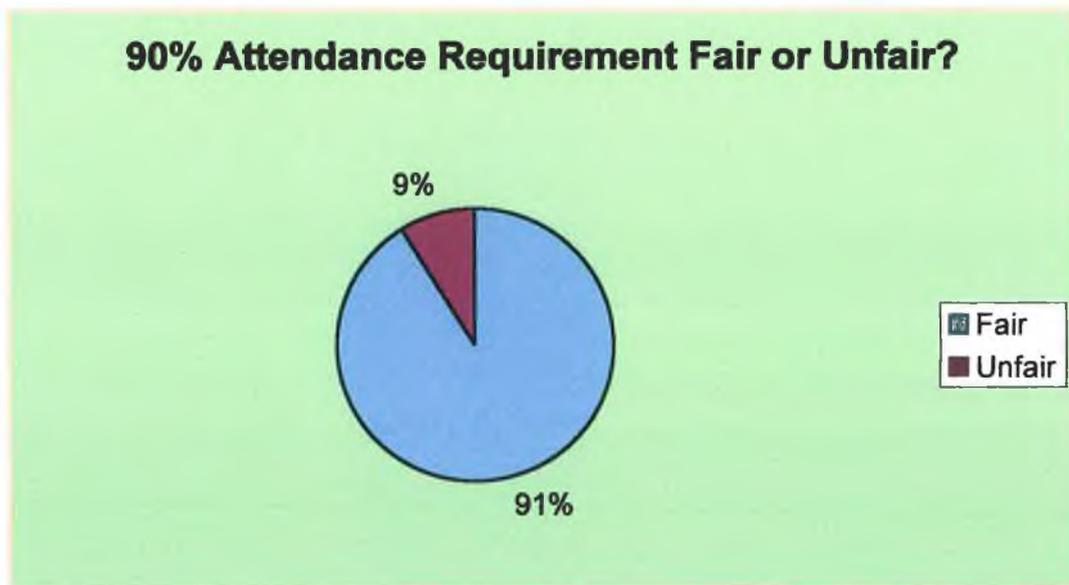
- Fair
- Unfair

Figure 4.13   *(N=33)*

When asked if they considered that the attendance requirement was fair 90.9% of graduates answered yes (Figure 4.13). Comments were invited and included the following: 'in working life 100% attendance is expected', 'it set me up well and got me disciplined to this day' and 'I found it an exciting challenge, we all got very competitive about it'. The focus groups also saw this requirement as very good training for working life.

> *The rule is strict but that's probably one of the things that disciplines you most. Sure if you don't have 90% attendance working in a bank you are going to get sacked.*
>
> *(20 year old, male)*

> *We'd be coming in with teeth hanging out. We'd have to be sent home before we'd go home. We'd pull each other through as well. We'd be knocking at the door for Edel and shouting 'think of your attendance'. In five minutes she'd be down the stairs.*
>
> *(21 year old, female)*

> *A very good rule it made you stay in school. But it wasn't very clear if you had football matches. I remember being marked absent but I was playing a school match.*
>
> *(23 year old, male)*

This final point suggests that clearer procedures need to be put in place to monitor absence as a result of school activities.

Just 9% of graduates considered the requirement unfair. Only one of this group included a comment: 'I felt it was more of a threat, I was told if I wasn't in everyday I'd fail the course'. Such perceptions are worrying and while held by only a minority they need to be addressed.

4.7 Currency

4.7.1 What Currency Does the LCA Qualification Hold?

One of the central concerns of this thesis is whether LCA is a worthwhile qualification in the world of work. This question was raised by both Boldt (1998) and O Donnabhain (1999). The current employment status of the graduates has already been discussed above (Chapter 4: 82/83). How employers respond to LCA as a qualification is also highly relevant. While only one respondent reports having been refused a job as an LCA graduate, alarmingly, 39.3% of respondents report having had experience of meeting employers who were not familiar with LCA. This issue was further explored in the focus group interviews. Graduates agreed that encountering ignorance of LCA is common in both the workplace and in college.

> *When you're filling out applications you have to write Leaving Cert. Applied if you write LCA they don't know what it is, they confuse it with LCVP.*
> *(19 year old, male)*

> *We had to go through a FAS interview and the girl didn't even know what LCA was.*
> *(22 year old, female)*

> *I got a distinction, 91%. The headman of the college came up to me and he said 'Did you not get points?' I said 'No, I did LCA' and he said 'What's that?' He was the head and he didn't even know what it was. I had just got my results that morning and I was in a buzz. Then I was just disgusted.*
> *(20 year old, female)*

The FAS interview took place in 2002, seven years after the introduction of LCA. It is entirely unsatisfactory that a graduate should encounter ignorance of the programme in such a setting. It is regrettable that this is the experience of LCA graduates and it must demean their qualification in their own eyes. Trant et al. (1999) argued that vocational education has traditionally had a lower status than academic or general education. These findings suggest that this continues to be the case for many LCA graduates.

When graduates encountered people who lacked knowledge of LCA they relished the opportunity to explain their qualification and to describe the course. They argued that while they find it annoying that people are still unaware of the LCA programme it can offer a great opportunity to 'show off'. They stressed that their belief in the course and the confidence gained in the task interviews equips them to give a very good account of LCA. While they have no fear of the actual interview they do worry that they may not get that far:

> *One kind of downfall is you have all the people skills but the initial part of any interview is what you have on paper. What you got in the Leaving Cert. When they see that you did LCA ... well if they don't like it they might not give you an interview. So I think on paper it doesn't look as good. Once you got to the interview stage you can handle it a lot better but the initial piece of paper doesn't look as good.*
>
> *(22 year old male)*

A number of interviewees believed that they had been successful in interviews because their description of the course impressed the employer sufficiently.

> *I had a job interview this year and they never heard about it. I think they only gave me the interview to ask me about LCA. But I got the job in the end. I really enjoyed telling them about it.*
>
> *(19 year old, female)*

Therefore it appears that while many employers are not aware of what LCA is the graduates are sufficiently skilled to convince them of the value of the programme. If this is the case then LCA is serving these students well.

4.7.2 Is LCA a Good Qualification?

When asked whether or not they considered LCA a good qualification to have, 90.9%

replied yes (Figure 4.14).

Is LCA a Good Qualification to Hold?

9%

91%

- Yes
- No
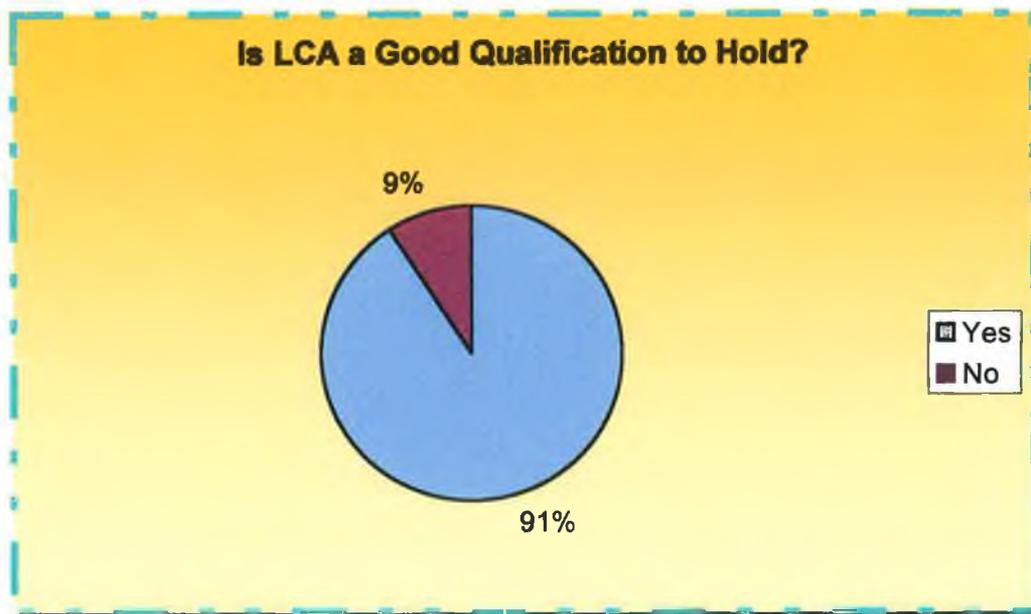
Figure 4.14   *(N=33)*

All of the 9% of graduates who responded negatively to this question are female. Allied to this 69.2% of graduates who have encountered ignorance of LCA among employers are female. This suggests that female graduates may be finding progression routes less accommodating.

Probing this question further in the focus group interviews did not prove conclusive. Some female graduates are very happy with their qualification and proud to have completed LCA.

> *I got the course I wanted with LCA and then I got the job I wanted.*
> *(19 year old, female)*

However others are not so positive and feel that their progress has been limited.

> *It was just a wrong decision for me. I think my life would have gone a whole different direction. Like at this stage now I'd love to go back and be an accountant. It's my own fault, I took the easy way out but I would have had more choice with the normal Leaving.*
> *(23 year old, female)*

If I were talking to the 3rd years I'd say there's no point in doing LCA if you think you're able for the Leaving Cert. It's better when you finish.
(19 year old, female)

Clearly these graduates feel that the established Leaving Certificate holds more value than their LCA qualification. Their experience appears to bear out the concerns of Boldt (1998) and O Donnabhain (1999) that LCA does in fact have less currency - at least for some graduates.

4.8 Work Experience

4.8.1 Work Experience and Employment

Graduates are very positive about the value of work experience when the placements are properly used. They are fully aware that where they did not plan placements properly they tended to be of less value. In hindsight a number of graduates regret choosing a placement purely for convenience:

The work experience wasn't great at all but that was because I didn't put my mind to it. I left it too late to find the placements, they were really just for convenience.
(22 year old, female)

I think a lot of people didn't plan it. I know I didn't plan one of them and it was a mistake.
(19 year old, male)

Graduates were very positive about what they termed 'good placements' and believed that these were excellent learning environments. This is consistent with the findings of the DES (2000)[1]. A number of people spoke of having discovered the area they wanted to work in through their placements.

I have a job now that I got interested in through work experience. I went to Pearce Street fire station. I always wanted to be fireman, now I have got in.
(22 year old, male)

---

[1] The DES (2000) found that 59% of students felt they were better prepared for the world of work as a result of work experience

The data from the questionnaires shows that in all 50% of graduates are currently working in an area that relates to one or more of their placements. This demonstrates that work experience is a valuable part of the LCA programme.

A significant value of work experience, which cannot be quantified, emerged in the interviews. Many graduates spoke of learning more about work which they did not want to pursue than about work they were interested in.

> *Work experience was great for that. You found out what you didn't want to do as well as what you did. I learned an awful lot of things that I didn't want to do that I thought I did.*
> *(23 year old, male)*

> *You go into an office and you know you couldn't do this all day, you know you couldn't sit in front of a computer.*
> *(20 year old, female)*

Graduates were happy that such lessons were very useful and in some cases prevented them from pursuing jobs and courses, which they believe they were not suited to.

4.8.2 Choosing Placements

A number of issues arose around who should choose the placement and some graduates were unhappy that they did not have sufficient choice around this. One girl felt aggrieved that she was placed in a shop against her wishes.

> *I had to work in a shoe shop. I had no interest it was just a waste of time. I was disgusted with the way it was handled.*
> *(22 year old, female)*

The girl accepts that she had not made an effort to find a placement[1] for herself. As a result the school found a last minute placement for her. In retrospect she accepts that it was her own fault but believes that even at the last moment she should have been consulted before taking up a placement. Other graduates agreed with this.

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[1] In the case study school students are required to find three of the four placements for themselves. The school finds the first placement; thereafter the responsibility is the student's.

It's very important students choose. They know where they're going in life.
(23 year old, male)

School and the students should decide the placement together. Students
must have a choice and the teacher really needs to listen.
(18 year old, male)

This is an important issue for graduates and needs to be addressed as it takes from

what is otherwise a very positive experience for many students.

4.9 Graduate Appraisal of LCA

4.9.1 Satisfaction with the Programme

Figure 4.15 shows how graduates responded when asked to rate the LCA course on a

scale of one to ten where one equals disappointing and ten equals excellent.
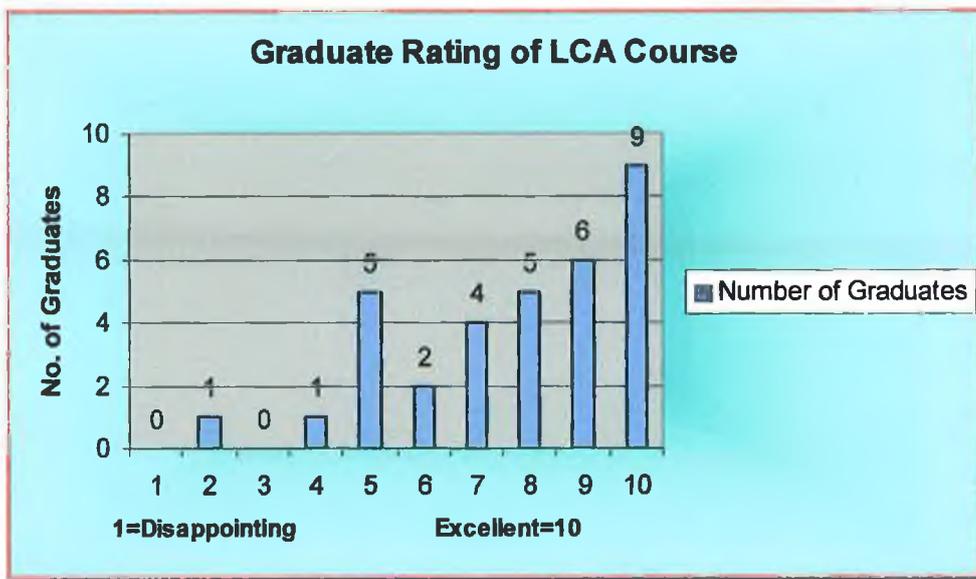
Figure 4.15   *(N=33)*

Only 6% of respondents give the programme a rating of less than 5 while 27% give it

10 out of 10. This response suggests that participation in the LCA programme is a

very positive experience for the majority of students.

When asked what they liked most about LCA the graduates referred to several aspects of the course (Figure 4.16). The tasks are very popular as are the smaller class size and the better relationships with teachers.

> *The teachers had time, they listened. We could sit down with them and discuss things and they'd sort you out.*
> *(22 year old male)*

> *The relationships with teachers were much better. Maybe it was because we had smaller classes and more time and we hadn't a whole big book to cram in.*
> *(19 year old, female)*

The emphasis on time is interesting and by implication suggests that more time needs to be given to students in junior cycle. The advantage of having smaller classes and learning to work together as a team featured strongly in the interviews.

> *I'd say what I took away from it was the teamwork. We were so close because our class was so small. It does teach you team skills and working with others.*
> *(23 year old, female)*
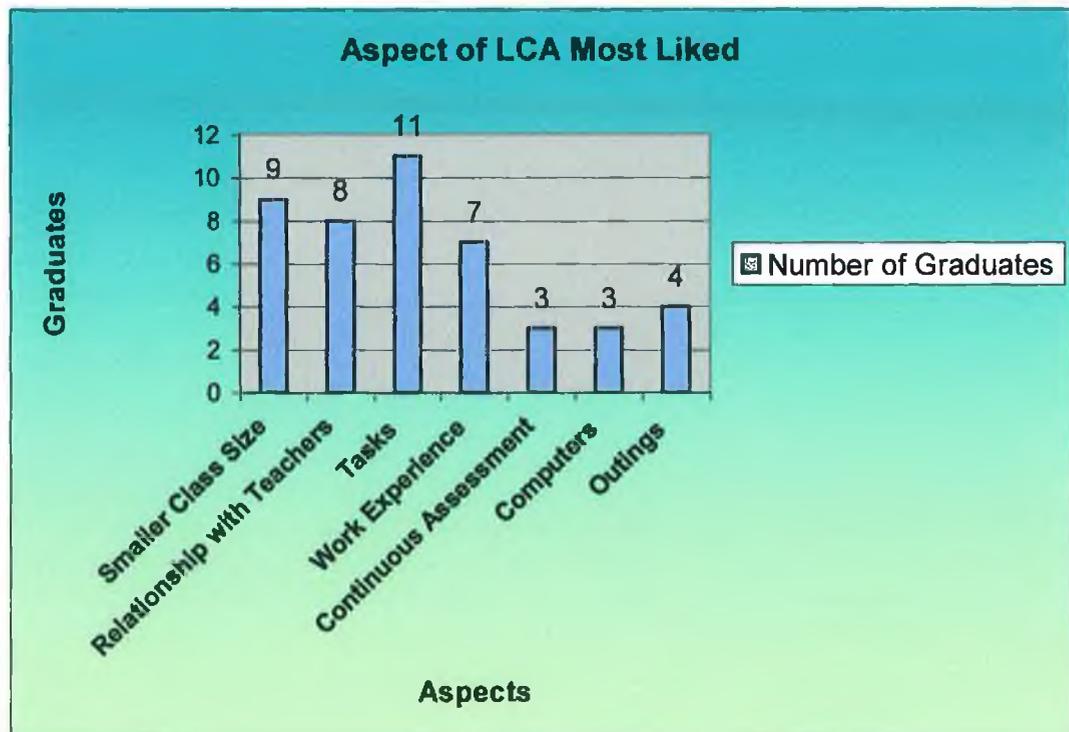
Figure 4.16 *(N=33)*

For some students LCA appears to be an incredibly positive experience as demonstrated by the following comments from the questionnaires:

- 'I loved every aspect of LCA it was the best thing I ever done I didn't want to leave'
- 'The classes, the tasks, the teachers, I loved the lot'
- 'There were so many things the course was just perfect, it helped people who thought they didn't have a future. It gave them more options'

On the subject of what they liked least about the programme the main complaint concerned how other students in the school perceive them. The word stigma was used a number of times.

The worst thing about it was the whole stigma attached to it.
(20 year old, female)

There was a stigma. You just felt different. It's hard to explain.
(19 year old, male)

Some graduates also complained that they found the course too easy. Other areas included difficulty with the level of computer work involved and pressure around tasks and interviews. The inability to progress straight to degree courses, disruptive students in LCA classes and feeling separated from friends in TY were also mentioned. There was a particular issue around the area of the Vocational Specialisms.

4.9.2 Vocational Specialisms

Graduates are unhappy with their lack of choice in the Vocationl Specialisms. The specialisms offered in the case study school are dictated by staff and material

resources as outlined above (Chapter 1: 26). The students have no input in the choice

of specialisms offered and this aggrieves some.

> *At the end of fifth year I discovered that there was a specialism in Leisure and*
> *Recreation but I had never known about it, it wasn't offered. I would have liked*
> *the option of doing that.*
> > *(20 year old, male)*

> *We had no choice in the options. Girls had office skills, boys had woodwork. I*
> *wanted to do metal work but we were stuck with office skills. It was very sexist,*
> *only the girls did office skills.*
> > *(19 year old, female)*

> *The boys were all doing woodwork and they were happy but if we didn't like office*
> *skills we were stuck. I only found out after that there is a whole list of options.*
> *The girls weren't happy with the choice we got.*
> > *(23 year old, female)*

Achieving gender balance in the take up of Vocational Specialisms was included in

the recommendations of the National Evaluation (DES, 2000). These comments

suggest that the school needs to address this area.

4.10 Retention

When asked if they believe they would have completed senior cycle had they opted

for TY and the Leaving Certificate Established 49% of graduates replied that yes they

would have completed senior cycle. They included comments such as the following:

'my parents wouldn't allow me to leave' and 'it is almost vital for females to have the

qualification to have a successful future'.

Had You Not Chosen LCA Would You Have Completed Senior Cycle?

6%

45%

49%

Yes
No
Unsure
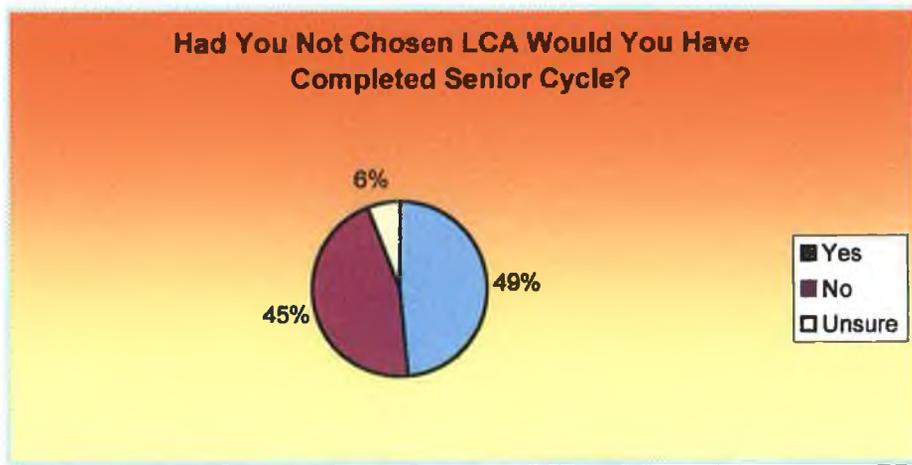
Figure 4.17   *(N=33)*

However a very sizeable proportion of graduates, 45%, believe they would not have completed senior cycle (Figure 4.17). Their comments included: 'not motivated enough to do study' and 'probably would have left, I hated school before LCA'. On exploring this area in the interviews a number of graduates were adamant that they would not have remained to completion were it not for LCA. Two female graduates talked of hating school in junior cycle and being very reluctant to return for senior cycle. Both agreed that they 'loved' LCA with its focus on activity. Another spoke of having agreed with her parents that she could leave school if she failed to get a place in the LCA class. One male graduate said:

> *In Junior I hated school. In LCA I was always here in the evenings and I even came in one Saturday to finish a task.*
> (19 year old, male)

> *I know I definitely wouldn't have finished the other Leaving Cert. A few girls from our class did TY and then did LCA behind us.*
> *(21 year old ,female)*

> *I'd say LCA is kinda a saviour for a lot of people because they would have just left and went and got a job or whatever.*
> *(23 year old, female)*

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Such responses are testament to the value of LCA for potential early leavers who struggle with the academic nature of the established Leaving Certificate. A significant percentage of students have gained certification at Leaving Certificate level because of the availability of a practical course, which offers activity and recognises a range of intelligences. Therefore, in the case study school the LCA programme appears to be aiding retention. This is consistent with the findings of the DES (2000).

Chapter Five

Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The findings emanating from the research data were presented in the previous chapter. The findings from the quantitative data secured through the graduate questionnaire were linked to the qualitative findings from the interviews with the graduates, the third level teachers, the employers and the coordinator. The purpose of this chapter is to summarise and analyse the main findings while making a number of recommendations as to how the LCA experience can be enhanced both locally and nationally.

5.2 Context of the Study

The prevailing circumstances in Irish education, which led to the introduction of LCA, were discussed in detail in Chapter Two. These included:

(a) The expansion of senior cycle participation highlighted the need for an alternative to the more academic Leaving Certificate Established (Boland and McNamara, 1994).

(b) The low levels of satisfaction experienced by many students with the Leaving Certificate Established as reported by Hannan and Shortall (1991).

(c) The desire of the government to increase retention at senior cycle to 90% by the year 2000 (Government of Ireland, 1995).

(d) The ongoing disadvantage experienced in the labour market by unqualified early

school leavers (Hannan, 1986; Nolan and Callan, 1994; McCoy and Whelan, 1996).

In this context LCA was introduced. Among its primary aims were the retention of students to completion of senior cycle and the preparation of students for adult and working life (DES/NCCA, 1995). Initially fears were expressed concerning the:

- Difficulty of getting schools to offer the programme
- The difficulty of getting ambitious parents to enrol their children in LCA
- The value the LCA qualification would hold on completion of the programme

(Trant et al., 1999: 42)

Ten years on from the introduction of LCA nationally, and nine years since its introduction in the case study school, the author has investigated the experience and progression of students who have completed the LCA programme in the school. The graduates have been given voice to express their level of satisfaction with the LCA programme and with the LCA qualification. The views of other key players namely employers and third level teachers have also been solicited.

5.3 Main Findings

The research findings demonstrate that many of the students who have graduated from the LCA programme in the case study school are extremely positive about their experience. When asked to rate the programme on a scale of one to ten 94% of graduates gave it a rating of five or more with 27% giving it an impressive ten out of ten. Several aspects of the course are highlighted as positives. These include work experience, tasks, continuous assessment,

teamwork, smaller class size and relations with teachers. The graduates spoke enthusiastically of improved confidence levels and enhanced self-esteem. This is consistent with the findings of Campbell (2001), Crowley (2002) and Lynch (2003). They were also aware that they had developed excellent organisational and presentation skills. In particular they were proud of their acquired people skills. All of the sample population are employed[1] with only one graduate in a semi/unskilled occupation. Almost half (45%) of the research group were adamant they would not have completed senior cycle were it not for the LCA option. These findings are very positive and are consistent with the school's commitment to LCA as discussed above (Chapter One: 19/20). The findings are also consistent with the findings of O Donnabhain (1999) and of the DES: "A particular focus of this report ... was the considerable positive impact which the programme was having on students" (2000: 73).

While many of the research findings are very positive a number of issues emerged which cause difficulty for some LCA students. Some of these relate to the school, some relate to the design of the programme and some relate to its perception. The author will pay particular attention to these areas in this concluding section as they form the basis for the ensuing recommendations.

5.4 Why Students Choose LCA as a Senior Cycle Option in the Case Study School

The research findings suggest that the main attractions of LCA, for third year students include: work experience, continuous assessment, a shorter course, offers better job prospects and is seen by some students as a better course.

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[1] One graduate is a full-time student but also works part-time.

It is reasonable to conclude from these findings that LCA is meeting its aim of catering for students for whom the Leaving Certificate Established is inappropriate. The fact that students see LCA as a better course and a course offering better job prospects suggest that these students are realistic about their own ability levels. It would appear that they can see the value of a more vocationally orientated course and are aware that employment opportunities in this area are more appropriate to their skills.

A number of issues emerged around the area of offering advice to Junior Cycle students on choosing LCA for senior cycle. Parents appear to play a significant role with almost half of the graduates (47.6%) recipients of parental advice. This contrasts with the findings of Crowley (2002) who found in a case study of her own site just 8% of parents of the LCA applicants were involved in the decision making process. Another positive was that the majority of parents (79%) were happy with their child's decision to do LCA. Three issues emerged which the school needs to address concerning advice to students on taking the LCA programme.

(i) In the final two years of the study no LCA candidate received parental advice. This suggests that following a very thorough promotion of LCA in earlier years the school may have become complacent and urgently needs to address the situation.

(ii) While graduates reported receiving advice on LCA from a wide range of sources, a worryingly high 36.3% of respondents claimed to have received no advice on choosing LCA. Given that this is probably their first really significant decision about their own education and that third years are on average just 15 years of age this situation is unsatisfactory. Just 9% of graduates list the Guidance Counsellor as a source of advice. The

lack of guidance counselling at junior cycle is a problem for all students. While schools would argue that this stems from a lack of DES resources it leaves a serious void in the education of junior cycle students. Boldt (1994) lists the importance of specialist counselling in tackling early school leaving. The primary losers are potential early leavers who may have left the system before career guidance becomes available at senior cycle. All junior cycle students need a level of career guidance when choosing a senior cycle option. In particular this is needed to alert them to the consequences of their decision when they complete their chosen Leaving Certificate. This emerged as an issue in the interviews with a number of graduates suggesting that they were unaware of the more limited progression opportunities LCA offered and they did not understand terms such as 'PLC'. The DES (2000) identified Guidance Counselling as an area where greater input is needed in LCA. These findings suggest that it is also needed prior to LCA, in the crucial decision making process.

(iii) A small minority of students believe they are coerced into doing LCA against their will. While the numbers are small (just one emerged from the questionnaires and the interviewees could only remember 'one or two') these students experience a grave sense of injustice and their situation needs to be addressed.

5.5 Participation in Further Education

The data from the questionnaires shows that the majority of graduates (79%), have progressed to further education on completion of second level. While this appears very satisfactory, a deeper analysis of what courses they take and what certification they receive is more worrying. Many LCA graduates go for PLC courses which offer progression routes to diploma courses in the Institutes of Technology. However, very few students succeed in making this progression. The quantitative data from the questionnaires revealed that only 6%

of respondents had progressed to diploma level. The interviews with the third level teachers supported this finding. Predominantly their experience was of LCA students struggling to complete FETAC Level 2 courses with few progressing further.

A significant finding, which emerged through the interviews with both graduates and the third level teachers, is the difficulty caused by the low standard of literacy and numeracy in LCA. Boldt (1998) and Campbell (2001) encountered similar problems. This is an area, which the DES (2000) did not investigate. The third level teachers were particularly vocal on this as an obstacle to third level success. Many examples were given of students being refused places on courses or getting on the course but struggling to complete it because of weakness in the areas of literacy and numeracy. This is consistent with a number of graduates saying they found these elements of the LCA course far too easy. However even these students were aware that others in the class were sufficiently challenged by the material. Also a number of graduates reported finding the terminal examinations much too simple. This presents a very significant problem.

The White Paper *Charting our Education Future* refers to the need to provide an 'appropriate' and 'beneficial' education to all students (Government of Ireland, 1995: 44). As Bray argues the curriculum must challenge the student in a: "... realistic fashion to do quality work ..." (1996: 106). If LCA does not challenge the more able students it will not attract them. Some graduates referred to LCA as having a 'stigma'. Failure to attract a wide range of student abilities can only exacerbate this problem. A mechanism must be found which allows for levels of literacy and numeracy in the programme which are attainable for weaker students but which also offer a sense of challenge and achievement for the more able students. In the past two years no graduate from the case study school has progressed to

further education. The co-ordinator and the third level teachers all agree that there is a decline in the standard of student taking LCA. Figures[1] from the DES show a fall in the percentage of students who achieve distinctions in LCA in three of the past four years. If this means that more 'weak' students are now staying on in senior cycle and taking the LCA option this is a positive development and is consistent with the aim of increased retention (Government of Ireland, 1995). However if it means that only weak students are opting for LCA then a serious problem may be emerging which ultimately will be detrimental to the LCA programme. The DES (2000) found that LCA was attracting students across the entire ability range. This may no longer be the case.

The need for learning support for LCA students also emerges from these findings. Campbell (2001) found a similar need in her research. Currently learning support is not provided for LCA students in the case study school even though many of the students who opt for LCA receive learning support in junior cycle. In the current year 40% of applicants have received learning support (Source: school records). It is unrealistic to expect these students to progress in senior cycle without making provision for continued support. There also appears to be a very definite need for such support to be continued in third level. One teacher said this had been discussed in her college and they had opted against providing support to avoid: "LCAing them all over again". If such support were made available to all students in third level this problem could be avoided.

The third level teachers reported a high level of dropout of LCA graduates, from PLC courses. Gleeson and Granville (1996) reported a similar experience with Senior Certificate, a forerunner of LCA, where few students progressed to further education and very few of

[1] These figures were obtained through personal communication with the DES.

those who did proceed, completed their courses. Mathews and Mulkeen (2002) found a similar trend in university where very high dropout exists among students with weak academic background. The third level colleges must address this problem.

The fact that no graduate had progressed to a degree course is very disappointing. The experience of one male graduate who wished to do so but failed as an LCA graduate to receive a place in an Irish institution while being accepted in a number of English colleges is highly unsatisfactory. The author can only conclude that some LCA graduates find the 'barriers' to third level too great and drop out of formal education as O Donnabhain had predicted (1999: 252).

The data from the interviews with the third level teachers suggests that LCA graduates have much greater success in 'skills based' PLC courses. This in turn suggests a key role for the Guidance Counsellor in advising students to apply for courses, which suit their particular abilities. There is also a need for guidance counselling to be continued at third level for LCA graduates particularly for those who are struggling. Provision of both guidance counselling and learning support should help reverse the current trend of high dropout of LCA graduates from PLC courses.

5.6 Employment and Work Experience

The graduates appear to enjoy considerable success in the labour market and have not settled for 'low skilled jobs or unemployment' as feared by O Donnabhain (1999: 252). These findings were supported by the interview data with just one of the graduates interviewed believing that her career would have taken a different route had she completed the established Leaving Certificate. While in the minority her experience is important. She was not a

'typical' LCA candidate as she had taken several subjects at higher level in her Junior Certificate. In hindsight she firmly believes that her LCA certificate offered her less opportunity than would the Leaving Certificate Established. Her experience is similar to that of the student who failed to gain a place on a teacher-training course. In conclusion it would appear that more able and more motivated graduates find progression routes less than accommodating. This may be evidence of the development of the 'two-tiered system' feared by the NESF (2002: 55). If this is so then it again discourages the more able students from taking LCA. This heightens the danger of LCA becoming as one third level teacher suggested a 'dumping ground' for the very weak. Lynch (2003) found teachers harboured similar fears as indeed does the coordinator in the case study school.

The findings of the employer interviews show that employers are positively disposed to LCA graduates. They consider them to be good workers, quite mature, though they were consistent in suggesting that they probably show less initiative than students who have completed the Leaving Certificate Established. This may well be a result of having had considerable teacher input in guiding them through the Student Tasks in LCA, a point suggested by the coordinator.

The attraction of the work-experience element of the course was striking with 48% of respondents including it as a reason to choose LCA. Its value is demonstrated by the fact that almost half of the research group are working in an area related to one or more of their placements. This is consistent with the findings of Boldt (1998), Campbell (2001) and the DES (2000). For those who choose their placements wisely it is a valuable learning experience where students learn about career opportunities to which they are suited and significantly, they also discover areas to which they are not suited. In contrast to the findings

of the DES (2000) dropout as a consequence of successful work experience is not a problem in the case study school.

The only negative aspect of work experience emerged where students do not secure their placements early. One student was particularly unhappy when the school found a last minute placement for her. While aware that the problem was of her own making, the graduate, now aged 22, is still bitter about the experience. Problems around such placements need attention.

5.7 Perception of LCA

The research findings suggest that LCA continues to have an image problem with 87% of graduates having heard LCA described as not a 'real' Leaving Certificate, a fear expressed by Bray (1996). Derogatory comments from Leaving Certificate Established students prove very hurtful and as one graduate suggested 'made us feel like second class citizens.' This is consistent with the findings of Trant et al. (1999) and Lynch (2003), though Boldt found that students did not express 'much concern' about the perception of the programme (1998: 37). The DES (2000) found that some students were reluctant to take up LCA because of its perceived lower status relative to other senior cycle options. This can only be harmful to the programme. In the case study school events such as tours and the annual graduation ceremony are problematic for LCA students. They perceive these as occasions of inequality. The author's experience and discussion with colleagues would suggest that the school is not aware of the extent of the problem. This area needs attention.

The findings suggest that teachers in the school are in the main very positively disposed to LCA. However derogatory comments or lack of interest by even one member of staff has the potential to damage the programme. The programme is now in its ninth year in the school

and there has been considerable turnover of staff in that period of time. It is important that new teachers in the programme should receive in-service training. Mechanisms must be found which ensure that all staff, particularly new members, are informed of the nature of the LCA programme and the sensitivities of some of the participants. This was effectively done in earlier years (Cavanagh, 1999). It should be an annual concern.

Over 39% of graduates report having encountered employers who did not know what LCA is. When the author contacted employers requesting interviews a number said they simply wouldn't know which Leaving Certificate their employees had completed. Others went further and admitted they do not know what LCA is. It was disturbing to hear graduates describe a similar experience in a FAS interview and very surprisingly in an interview in a College of Further Education. The author concludes that following the initial publicity around the introduction of LCA it does not currently enjoy a high profile in the labour market. As Boldt (1998) suggested LCA needs more national publicity.

5.8 Preparation for Adult and Working Life

A key principle of the Draft Programme Statement (DES/NCCA: 1995) was the preparation of students for adult and working life. The findings suggest that LCA has achieved this aim. In summarising what they had gained from the programme the graduates frequently used the term 'people skills'. The author deducted from the data that for the graduates 'people skills' incorporate a whole range of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. These include greater confidence, improved communication skills and better social skills. A consistent finding was that all of the graduates interviewed spoke enthusiastically of having enjoyed much improved relations with their teachers once they embarked on the LCA programme. This is very

significant because as Boldt (1994) found, relationships with teachers can be the deciding factor for students in the decision to leave early or to remain in school.

A number of factors appear to contribute to these improved student/teacher relations. Certainly the smaller class groups seem to be a very significant factor. The different approach to teaching and learning employed in LCA helps (Boldt, 1998; DES, 2000). Also graduates believe that their teachers treat them as adults when they undertake LCA. The author believes that the need for students to become actively involved in the programme, their need to take responsibility for their attendance and for completing key assignments changes the student/teacher relationship. Probably for the first time in their education they are given responsibility for their own learning and progression. This would equate with being treated as 'adults' and is possibly one of the real strengths of LCA. One graduate summed up the situation succinctly:

> *The others did Transition Year but we had to do a transition from childhood to adulthood an awful lot quicker than them. We had a transition but we had it all at once.*
> *(21 year old, male)*

The improved confidence appears to be acquired in a number of areas including the completion of tasks particularly where interpersonal skills are called for. Examples include contacting outside agencies, speaking to groups, making telephone calls and securing work experience placements. However the primary source of confidence gained appears to be in the interviews undertaken on completion of each task. For students who, often (as the findings suggest) have low levels of literacy this is an opportunity to discuss their work, in a forum which suits their skills. The findings from the interviews with the third level teachers support the view that the graduates have high levels of confidence and acquit themselves very well in interview.

One apparent contradiction emerges when this finding is looked at in conjunction with the high dropout from PLC courses. An example is the case discussed above (Chapter 4: 82) where several LCA graduates left a course during a period when the tutor was absent due to illness. When the tutor investigated, none of the 'dropouts' had sought assistance from support agencies such as the Career Guidance teacher or the Course Coordinator. This raises the possibility that for some, their confidence is possibly 'site specific' and is not transferable in new settings or situations. This point was suggested by the coordinator in the case-study school. LCA tutors and coordinators give students a very high level of support within the programme. It is possible that some will struggle without this support on completion of LCA.

Other skills acquired or developed in the LCA programme include time management, organisational skills and presentation skills. The graduates are fully aware and very proud of their skills. In the PLC courses they realised that this gives them an advantage over Leaving Certificate Established students and it seems to reinforce their belief that LCA was a good choice for them. Similarly they are very aware that having to achieve 90% attendance has been a valuable discipline. The policy is clearly working in the case study school with 73% of respondents reporting improved attendance in LCA. Boldt (1998) found a similar improvement in attendance. However Lynch (2003) found that in some schools students complained about the attendance requirement. In this study the graduates see the necessity for good attendance in working life. In the interviews many of them referred to 90% attendance as minimalist and inadequate in the labour market. Two issues of concern for the school emerge from the data on attendance. One graduate saw the rule as a 'threat' and another was penalised for absence while playing a school match. While these are isolated findings their existence must be acknowledged and addressed.

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Whether the graduates acquired their skills in LCA or whether they actually developed skills they already possessed but had remained 'dormant' as one graduate suggested is an interesting question. The awakening of such skills suggests that LCA is tapping in to areas the more academic Junior Certificate curriculum failed to reach. Gleeson and Granville (1996: 126) suggest that LCA has the 'breadth and balance' to reward a much broader range of 'intelligences, abilities and practical skills'. This appears to be happening for many LCA students.

5.9 LCA - A Less Satisfactory Qualification for Girls?

A disturbing theme, which surfaced a number of times in the findings, is that female graduates appear less happy with their LCA experience and qualification than their male counterparts. Within the programme itself females register more complaints about the choice of specialisms offered. This is consistent with the findings of Campbell (2001). On completion of LCA their experience appears to be more negative than that of the male graduates. For example, over two thirds of those who have encountered ignorance of LCA in the workplace are female. All of the graduates from the study who consider that LCA is not a good qualification are female. Just 4 graduates believe LCA is not a good preparation for adult and working life and 3 of these are female. This trend must be of concern and perhaps merits a more in-depth study than the parameters of this thesis allow. In an era where much emphasis is placed on equality[1] it is unsatisfactory that the LCA programme should serve female students less well than their male peers.

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[1] The White Paper *Charting our Education Future* states that the education system should have a philosophy that embraces all students, 'female and male on a basis of equality' (Government of Ireland, 1995: 8).

5.10 A Good Qualification

Over 90% of the students surveyed believe that LCA is a good qualification to hold. This suggests that many of those who opt for LCA believe they have made the correct choice. However, another much smaller group emerged in the findings. These graduates believe that the Leaving Certificate Established is a better qualification. This group includes those who believe their progression has been limited as LCA graduates and also those who suggest that LCA is a good course but qualify this with 'depending on what type of work you want to do.' These graduates believe that had they completed the 'other' Leaving Certificate they would enjoy greater choice. This is disappointing as it is a further disincentive for able, ambitious students to take LCA.

5.11 Conclusion

The author concludes that LCA in the case study school offers a very positive experience and indeed a Leaving Certificate, to students, many of whom would not otherwise complete senior cycle. It offers a very good preparation for adult and working life. Graduates from LCA experience considerable success in the labour market. The majority of the research group are very happy with their LCA qualification. They have high levels of self-confidence and are proud of their many skills. This finding was supported by the data from the employers and the third level teachers. However some graduates have found that their Leaving Certificate does not enjoy parity of esteem with the Leaving Certificate Established. For some this belief was compounded by their failure to progress to diploma and degree courses in third level. For others it was evident when they encountered employers who had no knowledge of LCA. The following recommendations should enhance the LCA experience

for students and should make a significant contribution to tackling the problems they encounter on graduation.

5.12 Recommendations

For the school under study

1 The school currently has a very good admissions policy in place for LCA. However a small number of students feel pressurised into taking the programme. No student should be enrolled in the LCA programme against his/her will. Students should be advised that LCA appears to be the better option for them if the school believes so. However if the student still wishes to pursue one of the other Leaving Certificate programmes s/he should be allowed to do so.

2 The school needs to actively promote LCA among the parents of current junior cycle students. A booklet could be produced, possibly as an LCA task, outlining the main features of the programme and highlighting the achievements of students past and present. An information evening for parents, where both LCA graduates and LCA students speak, and where LCA work is on display should prove very informative. This information will empower parents to advise their children on LCA as a senior cycle option.

3 Account must be taken of the age and inexperience of third year students faced with making a serious decision about senior cycle. All third year applicants for LCA should be advised, individually, on the nature of the course and the consequences of their choice. Career Guidance hours should be made available for this.

4   All LCA candidates should be assessed in the areas of literacy and numeracy at the start of the programme to ascertain their level of need. Learning support should be provided for all those in need. This will demand resources and will prove difficult to timetable, as withdrawal from class[1] would lead to loss of credits. However it is a necessity for weaker students.

5   To cater for the range of abilities of LCA students, teachers must employ mixed ability teaching strategies in their classes to ensure that all students are challenged appropriately.

6   Prior to completion of the programme LCA students need to be carefully advised as to which PLC courses suit their abilities. The Career Guidance counsellor has a key role to play here. Students who are performing at pass level should be encouraged to pursue more skills based courses. While students who are achieving merits or distinctions should be able for courses with significant elements of literacy and numeracy.

7   The policy to monitor LCA attendance is strictly adhered to in line with the recommendations of the DES (2000) and is very successful. However some work needs to be done to ensure that no student feels threatened by the requirement:

    (a) A class talk from an LCA graduate emphasising the importance of good attendance in the workplace should ensure that students understand and appreciate the purpose of the requirement.

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[1] In junior cycle, students are withdrawn from subjects such as Irish and French to receive learning support.

(b) The policy also needs to be clarified for students who miss class through involvement in school activity.

8 The school needs to be aware that many LCA students feel that they are negatively perceived by the Leaving Certificate Established students and believe that there is a stigma attached to LCA. The school must be proactive in tackling this and must promote the image of LCA amongst the mainstream students. The following steps are recommended:

(a) When Fifth-Year Group assemblies[1] are held they should include fifth year students of all Leaving Certificate programmes. On these occasions it must be emphasised that all are Leaving Certificate students without distinction. This needs to be repeated at the start of sixth year when all final year students are allowed to wear the distinctive black jumper.

(b) All announcements and notices for fifth and sixth year students should include fifth and sixth year LCA students, without distinction.

(c) All students should be encouraged to report any incidents of bullying or derogatory comments and these should be dealt with in line with the schools anti bullying policy. The students' council could play a role in encouraging students who feel victimised to come forward.

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[1] Year group assemblies are a feature of the school. They are seen as an opportunity to develop positive group identity and a sense of belonging. Currently LCA groups have separate assemblies.

(d) Teachers need to be reminded regularly at staff council meetings that the perception of LCA is a sensitive issue for many students. Mindful of this they should promote the programme and encourage LCA students wherever the opportunity arises. Teachers also need to be vigilant in observing the interaction between senior cycle students.

(e) Successful past students should be invited to the school, occasionally, to talk to student groups. Invitations to LCA graduates will help raise the profile of the programme not just for LCA students but for all students.

(f) The sixth year graduation is currently problematic. While there are two LCA students on the organising committee they are younger and often feel intimidated. In future LCA students need a stronger voice on the organising committee. The inclusion of two teachers; an LCA tutor and a tutor from a Leaving Certificate Established class, should safeguard the rights of both groups.

9   The school currently has good work experience structures in place. However it has to be anticipated that in any group some student(s) will fail to find a good placement. A procedure for finding late placements, which includes the student, needs to be developed.

10 Induction for new staff members needs to include information on the LCA programme and on the sensitivities of some of the participants. Occasional

presentations should be made to the whole staff to ensure that all members are fully aware of all aspects of the programme.

11 In line with the recommendations of the DES (2000) the school should now evaluate the LCA programme. Contributions should be invited from the main stakeholders: staff, students, parents, employers, Colleges of Further Education and the local community.

12 Greater effort needs to be made to ensure gender equity in the choice of Vocational Specialisms offered in the school. With the opening of a new sports complex in September 2005 the school should now investigate the possibility of offering the specialism in Active Leisure Studies.

For the Colleges of Further Education

The colleges of further education must endeavour to support more LCA candidates through their third level courses. The following steps will help:

(i) A one-week induction course[1] for LCA students prior to the start of first term is recommended. This could be an opportunity to familiarise students with the support services available to them. Should they encounter difficulty they will then be more likely to seek assistance. Orientation for these students should continue throughout first term.

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[1] The case study school is currently involved in the Trinity Access Programme (TAPS). This programme supports disadvantaged students through third level. TAPS run a very successful induction programme for first year students.

(ii) Support in literacy and numeracy should be available to students in need in third level.

(iii) Guidance Counsellors in third level need to be vigilant in monitoring the progress of LCA graduates. Where students are struggling early intervention is critical. This should ensure that students receive the help they need and in turn should reduce dropout from PLC courses.

(iv) Pastoral care should be available to all third level students but especially LCA students because of their pattern of high dropout.

(v) PLC course designers need to incorporate teaching approaches and assessment procedures used in LCA. This will ease the transition for students and should facilitate greater levels of success.

At National Level

1. The literacy and numeracy elements of the LCA programme are currently inadequate. They do not challenge the more able students and leave graduates ill prepared for third level education. To ensure that LCA continues to attract a range of abilities the literacy and numeracy elements of the programme must be enhanced. Offering these elements at two levels, higher and ordinary as in the Leaving Certificate Established could do this. Alternatively offering additional optional modules in both these areas could achieve it.

2. Further work needs to be done to make access to third level education easier for LCA graduates. It is unacceptable that an LCA graduate who has progressed through certificate and diploma courses can get a place in an English college but not in an Irish institution. As Gleeson and Granville (1996) suggested more third level places should be set aside for LCA graduates.

3. The profile of LCA needs to be raised nationally. The DES needs to be proactive in promoting the programme, particularly among employers so that when a graduate presents an LCA certificate it is both recognised and understood. This could be achieved through a focused and determined media campaign.

4. An in-depth national study is needed to investigate the experiences of LCA graduates. Areas of particular focus should include:

    (a) **(i)** What percentage of graduates progress to third level?

    (ii) What percentage of these students receive certification at third level?

    (iii) At what level is this certification received?

    (b) As Boldt (1998) suggested a tracking system should be set up for LCA graduates. The currency of LCA in the world of work can then be assessed.

    (c) The level of satisfaction experienced by female graduates with their LCA qualification needs investigation.

_____ **Community College**

QUALITY AND EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

_____Community College was established in 1982 to meet the second level, educational needs of the community. We commit ourselves to work for this purpose with dedication and professional expertise. We acknowledge and value the active support we receive form parents, the Board of Management and County Dublin VEC in all aspects of school life. We commit ourselves to care for you, our students, and to provide for your well-being. We strive to create a positive, respectful atmosphere in the College encouraging good teaching and learning. We expect you, our students, to share and uphold the values of our college. As teachers, we endeavour to embody our values in our relationship with you, the students.

In working as a team we aim to assist you to:

- ❖ Discover and realise your own potential
- ❖ Achieve to the highest of your abilities
- ❖ Lead a rewarding and fulfilling life
- ❖ Strive for excellence
- ❖ Develop personal discipline in your live
- ❖ Respect and care for your own well-being and the well-being and rights of others
- ❖ Understand and appreciate the values and traditions of our society
- ❖ Become good citizens
- ❖ Understand, respect and actively contribute to the community in which you live

We invite you to become a good student in _____ Community College.

February 21st 2005

Dear _____,

                        I am at present undertaking some study in NUI, Maynooth. As part of my work I am doing research on the experiences of Leaving Certificate Applied students in _____ Community College. I would very much appreciate if you would complete the enclosed questionnaire. Any information you supply will be treated in the strictest confidence.

The purpose of the survey is investigate how you feel about having done Leaving Certificate Applied and how useful this qualification has been to you since you left school. I would also like to find out if you have participated in any further education or training since leaving school and if you are employed I would like to find out what sort of employment you are involved in.

I would be very grateful if you would complete the questionnaire and return it to me by March 2nd in the special envelope provided. If you would like to see a copy of the results of the survey I would be very happy to send you a copy of them when I have completed my study.

If you have any questions about this please contact me at the school number above. Looking forward to hearing from you,

Yours sincerely,

_____

Senan Nolan

LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED

QUESTIONNAIRE for LCA GRADUATES

Any information which you provide in completing this questionnaire will be treated in the strictest confidence.

1 Which of the following categories best describes your age? *Please tick.*

17–20	21-23	24-26

2 In what year did you complete LCA? *Please tick.*

1998	
1999	
2000	
2001	
2002	
2003	
2004	

3 Are you male or female? *Please tick.*

Male	Female

4 Since leaving school have you engaged in any further education/training?

Yes	No

5 If you have engaged in further education/training which of the following best describes the course? *You may tick more than one box.*

☐ Post Leaving Certificate Course

☐ Certificate Course

☐ Apprenticeship

☐ Diploma Course

☐ Degree course

☐ Other

Please give course title: _____

_____

6 Which of the following areas marked 1 - 6 best describes your present position? *Fill in one area only.*

1 **In Education**	**Course Title** _____ **Year of Course** _____ **College/Institution** _____
2 **In Part-time Work**	**Position Held**_____ **Type of Work** _____ **How long are you working in this position?** _____
3 **Permanent, Full-time work**	**Position held** _____ **Type of Work** _____ **How long are you working in this position?** _____
4 **Unemployed**	**How long have you been unemployed?** Please tick. **Less than six months** ☐ **Between six months and one year** ☐ **More than one year** ☐ **Have you worked previously?**_____ **Type of work** _____
5 **Other**	**Please specify:** _____ _____

7 **Are you presently working in an area related to any of your LCA work experience placements?** *Please tick.*

Yes	No

If <u>Yes</u> please specify: _____

_____

8 **If you are not presently working in an area related to any of your work experience placements have you ever done so?** *Please tick.*

Yes	No

If <u>Yes</u> please specify_____

_____

REASONS FOR DOING LCA

9 **In junior cycle were you advised about doing LCA?** *Please tick.*

Yes	No

If <u>Yes</u> who advised you? *You may tick more than one box.*

Year Head	
LCA Coordinator	
School Principal	
Teachers	
Tutor	
Guidance Counsellor	
Parents	
Older Brothers/Sisters	
Friends	

10 Whose decision was it for you to do LCA? *Please tick.*

Your decision	Your parents' decision	The school's decision

11 Did you decide to do LCA for any of the following reasons? *You may tick more than one box.*

Shorter Course	
Better Course	
No Homework	
No Books	
An Easier Course	
More Work Experience	
Less Exams	
Better Job Prospects	
Not allowed to do Transition Year	
Other	

If other please specify: _____

_____

12 How did your parents feel about you doing LCA? *Please tick.*

Pleased	Unsure	Didn't care	Unhappy

13 Has any other member of you family done LCA? *You may tick more than one box.*

Nobody	
Older Brother	
Older Sister	
Younger Brother	
Younger Sister	

PERCEPTIONS OF LCA:

14 Have you ever heard anyone describe LCA as: 'not a real Leaving Certificate'? *Please tick.*

Yes	No

If Yes have you heard any of the following describe it as 'not real'.
You may tick more than one box.

☐ Parents

☐ Brother/Sister

☐ Teachers

☐ LCA Classmates

☐ Leaving Certificate Established Students

☐ Employers

☐ Others

15 Do you believe that LCA is a good qualification to have? *Please tick.*

Yes	No

16 Would you advise a younger brother/sister to do LCA? *Please tick.*

Yes	No

17 Do you feel LCA prepared you well for adult and working life? *Please tick.*

Yes	No

Please explain: _____

_____

18 **Have you ever been refused a course or a job because you did LCA rather than the established Leaving Certificate?** _Please tick._

Yes	No

If Yes please give details: _____

_____

19 **Have you ever spoken to an employer who did not know what LCA is?** _Please tick._

Yes	No

If Yes please give details: _____

_____

20 **How do you feel now about your decision to do LCA?** _Please tick._

I am very happy I did LCA	I don't have an opinion on it.	I regret doing LCA

21 **Is LCA a good qualification for getting a job when you leave school?**

Yes	No

22 If you had done Transition Year do you think you would have stayed in school to complete your Leaving Certificate? *Please tick.*

Yes	No

Why:_____

_____

THE LCA COURSE

23 On a scale of 1 to 10, (where 1 equals disappointing and 10 equals excellent), place an X on the diagram below to show how you rate LCA.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

A
Disappointing
Programme

An
Excellent
Programme

24 Which aspects of LCA did you find most useful? (Rate 1 to 6 – one being the best and six being the worst)

Continuous assessment (credits)	
Work Experience	
Tasks	
Specialisms	
Smaller Class Size	
No Homework	

25 Was your attendance in LCA better or worse than in Junior Certificate? *Please tick.*

Better	Worse	The Same

26 How did you find having to have 90% attendance? *Please tick.*

Fair	Unfair

Please explain: _____

_____

27 What things did you like most about LCA?

_____

_____

28 What things did you like least about LCA?

_____

_____

29 Were you advised about the choice of jobs and courses available to you after you completed LCA. *Please tick.*

Yes	No

If yes who advised you. *You may tick more than one box.*

Guidance Counsellor	
LCA Coordinator	
Tutor	
Teachers	
Parents	
Friends	
Other	

If Other please explain: _____

_____

Appendix 4: Interview Guide for Focus Groups

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR FOCUS GROUPS

THE LCA PROGRAMME

1. When did you first begin to think about LCA for senior cycle?

2. Why did you choose LCA?

3. Who advised you about LCA as a senior cycle option? Did you get sufficient information about the programme?

4. What areas of LCA were better than you expected?

5. Were you disappointed with any areas?

6. Which parts of the LCA programme did you enjoy most?

7. In what area of LCA did you learn most?

8. In school how did you feel LCA students were treated relative to Leaving Certificate Established students?

WORK EXPERIENCE

1. Is work experience a good idea?

2. Who found the placements?

3. Did you have a choice of where you worked?

4. Do you feel you made good choices?

5. Was work experience well organized by the school?

6. What could be done to make it a more useful experience?

COLLEGE/WORK

1. Do you think that LCA gave you a good preparation for college/work?

2. Are most of your friends/colleagues in college/work Leaving Certificate Established or LCA graduates?

3. Do you see any differences between graduates of both courses?

4. Are people positive/negative when they talk about LCA? Was this your own experience?

5. Do you see yourself as better prepared for work/college than Leaving Certificate Established students? In what ways?

6. What weaknesses do you see in Leaving Certificate Established graduates?

7. Do you feel that they have any advantages over you?

PERCEPTIONS

1 How do you think LCA is perceived in school by:

- Staff

- LCA students

- Leaving Certificate Established students

- Junior students

2 How do you think LCA is perceived in college/work by: staff/colleagues/boss?

ATTENDANCE

1. Did the 90% attendance rule work for you?

2. Is it necessary?

3. How do you think your attendance in LCA compared to your friends who went on to do TY?

FUTURE

1. Can you see yourself returning to education in the future?

2. What would you be doing now if you had taken the established Leaving Certificate?

Appendix 5: Interview Guide for 3rd Level Teachers

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR 3RD LEVEL TEACHERS

1. Are you aware when you meet a class whether the students have completed the Leaving Certificate Established or the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme?

2. Are LCA students distinguishable in any way from Leaving Certificate Established students in your classes?

3. Are there any areas where LCA students tend to be more skilled or confident than Leaving Certificate students?

4. LCA students have considerable experience of project work and also of discussing their work in an interview situation. Are these skills discernible? How do they present?

5. Are there any areas where Leaving Certificate Established students are obviously more confident and more skilled?

6. Are there any aspects of your course, which prove difficult for LCA students?
    Are there any aspects of your course, where LCA students excel?

7. In your experience of teaching LCA students are any patterns evident in terms of:

    (a)   completion of courses

    (b)   progression to further courses

8. Are variations in skills/confidence etc. noticeable in LCA students coming from different schools?

9. Would you be aware what specialisms LCA students have completed in school? Does this show in their skill/ability level?

10. If you were to identify one strength in LCA students what would it be?
    If you were to identify one weakness what would it be?

11. Are any patterns evident in the attendance of LCA students?

12. Do you believe that the LCA programme has prepared the students well for further education?

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS

1. When you take on an employee are you aware which Leaving Certificate programme s/he has completed?

2. Have you ever dismissed an application because it was one Leaving Certificate rather than the other?

3. When you interview prospective employees how do LCA students compare to Leaving Certificate Established students in the interview situation?

4. In your employment do you notice any skills or strengths of one group above the other?

5. When a vacancy arises would you look for a graduate from one Leaving Certificate programme rather than the other depending on the skills required for that particular position?

7. What are the main strengths LCA graduates bring with them to the workplace?

8   Are there any particular weaknesses they bring with them?

9   Teamwork, improved confidence levels and people skills are all areas where the students themselves believe they gain a lot in LCA. Have you observed any of these in the workplace?

10. How does the punctuality and attendance of LCA graduates compare to other employees?

11. In your opinion are LCA graduates good employees? Please elaborate!

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR LCA COORDINATOR

THE LCA PROGRAMME

1. Is there a need for a programme like LCA in the school?

2. What does LCA offer to students above the other Leaving Certificate programmes?

3. How has LCA changed in your time as coordinator?

4. Do you see any change in the nature/standard of student taking the LCA programme nowadays?

5. Do you see a difference in standard or approach between the students who achieve distinctions/merits and those who achieve a pass?

6. The graduates talk about gaining self-confidence and social skills from the course. In your opinion which elements of the course promote these skills?

7. What are the ingredients for a good dynamic within an LCA class?

8. What are the main strengths of the programme?

9. Are there weaknesses in the programme?

10. Are parents as involved in decision-making around LCA as they should be?

11. Is the school doing enough to promote the LCA programme?

12. Do you think LCA is granted parity of esteem locally/nationally?

13. How do students react to having to have 90% attendance? Do all students reach the target?

14. Are students happy with the choice of specialisms?

15. Is there sufficient careers guidance input in the programme in the school? Were any changes made following the National Evaluation in 2000?

16. Are you happy with the current arrangements around work experience?

17. What is the main gain for students from work experience?

18. What are the employment opportunities available to LCA students when they finish the programme?

19. What direction would you like to see the LCA programme taking in the future?

St. John's Community College

Date xxxxxxxxxxx

Dear Employer,

Thank you for offering Work Experience to Leaving Certificate Applied students from this college.

Leaving Certificate Applied is a two-year course with a strong emphasis on Vocational Preparation and Vocational Education. Introduction to the world of work and work experience placements are essential parts of this. Students learn by facing the reality of a work environment, job hunting, observing experienced skilled workers, performing work tasks, presenting themselves with confidence and relating to supervisors, employers and the public.

I hope the two weeks go well for all concerned.

Thanking you

Yours sincerely

XXXX   XXXXXX
LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED CO-ORDINATOR

St John's Community College would like to thank you for providing this placement for one of our students. Such placements provide very valuable learning opportunities for the students and we greatly appreciate your support in this respect. In order to help us assess the student's overall suitability and performance during the placement we ask that this form be completed as fully as possible, preferably by someone whom the student is directly working with or responsible to, within your company.

Should you require any further information or have any difficulty regarding this placement, please contact:

XXXX XXXXXX
1 LCA Co-Ordinator
Telephone Number☎: XXXXXXX
E-mail Address🖳: st.johns cc@yahoo.ie

ST. JOHN'S COMMUNITY COLLEGE
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

EMPLOYER'S REPORT FORM

for

WORK EXPERIENCE

LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLIED

LEAVING CERTIFICATED APPLIED – WORK EXPERIENCE REPORT FORM

Name of student:_____

Name of Employer:_____

Starting date:_____ Finishing date:_____

Address: _____

Type of work undertaken: _____

_____

Hours worked by student each day: _____

Supervisor/Contact person: _____

Number of days worked by student: _____

Telephone Number: _____

Categories of Assessment	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Additional comments
Dress/Appearance					
Attendance*(see below)					
Punctuality					
Ability to complete Tasks					
Quality of work completed					
Communication with clients, fellow workers, supervisor					
Aptitude/interest shown					
Care and use of equipment and observance of general health/safety regulations					

*Please state if students contacted workplace to explain absence: ————————————————

Supervisor's Signature: _____ Date_____

Thank you for your co-operation

Appendix 10: Comments taken from the Graduate Questionnaires

Question 7

Are you presently working in an area related to any of your LCA work experience placements? If Yes please specify…

Male

- I worked in a school and now I'm a special needs assistant.

- I did work experience in 5th year in a Health and Fitness Centre and now I'm a fitness instructor.

- I did more manual physical type of work, which gave me the knowledge and experience I needed and gave me the confidence I needed to decide what to do.

- I worked in a garage and now thats what I do.

- I was with a crowd doing alarms now I'm with a CCTV engineer.

- I am working in _____ Civil Engineering, a company which I did an experience placement in.

- I am working in a school doing P.E. and football where I had a 6th year placement.

Female

- I am employed in a salon, and did a salon work experience placement.

- Yes, every day I do filing and business writing.

- Dealing with computers which was what I done in one experience.

- I work mainly on the telephone so office skills prepared me for that type of work.

- I did hairdressing in my last year and loved it and decided to go for it.

- I am working in administration; I had work experience twice in offices while I was in LCA.

- I worked in an office environment during my work experience placements and I still am.

- I'm in Child care which I tried.

Question 8

If you are not presently working in an area related to any of your work experience placements have you ever done so? If <u>Yes</u> please specify...

Male

- Yes I worked in a Fitness Centre for a while.

- I was in the Motor trade for a year.

- Apprenticeship Air Conditioning Engineer, the same company I did my work experience with.

- I have worked in a retail store and was promoted to a manager.

- I worked in Painting and Decorating.

Female

- I used to do Salon work when I left school.

- I was childminding for a while before.

- Dealing with computers

- I did some ward clerk work in one of my placements so that is general office work

- I did Physical Education.

- The job that I am in now I had work experience as an administrator in LCA so that really helped a lot.

Question 11

Did you decide to do LCA for any of the following reasons? *You may tick more than one box.*

Shorter Course	
Better Course	
No Homework	
No Books	
An Easier Course	
More Work Experience	
Less Exams	
Better Job Prospects	
Not allowed to do Transition Year	
Other	

If Other please specify:

Male

- Prospects seemed as good as traditional Leaving and more work experience.

- It suited my ability better.

- It suited me because of my work aspects I didn't want to go onto 3rd level education.

- I preferred to do more practical work than written exams.

- I was sort of pressured into doing the course.

- The computer courses.

Female

- I knew what I wanted to do as soon as I finished school and I knew I could do it with either Leaving Cert.

- I decided to do LCA because I felt that it suited me better, I was never good at school so when I heard about LCA it sounded like what I needed.

- The reason I did LCA was because I wanted a Leaving if I had done TY I wouldn't have completed it. I could never study.

- Office skills I really enjoyed that subject and all the vocational preparation. They prepared me for the working world.

- I found it hard to sit in class and concentrate. LCA was more activity work which was way better. If there was no LCA I wouldn't have a Leaving Cert.

- I was allowed to do TY but my year head and myself thought it would be a better course for me.

- I choose it because I am not that good at study and doing honours.

Question 17

Do you feel LCA prepared you well for adult and working life?

Yes/No   Please explain:

YES (Male)

- Tasks made me realise that planning is the key to everything. Interviews prepared me for work interviews in a way.

- At the start I was unconvinced but I think it gave me valuable people skills I needed that were essential in my line of work.

- A lot of assignments involve going talking to people, which gave me a lot of confidence in myself.

- Less students, teachers had more time for individuals.

- Communication skills, interpersonal, work experience, practical, fun.

- LCA is more geared towards working than studying, which helped.

- Because you got a lot of work experience and found out about a lot of jobs also.

- Because with the work placements it gave me a chance to find out what the outside world was like.

- It gave me a lot of experience in the work environment.

- Because it gave me knowledge of work and what to do and how to prepare for it.

- It was a well-planned short LC that I worked hard in to mature myself in.

- You get more responsibility by doing LCA.

- More practical, doing the four work experience placements allowed me to get a first hand look at the working area.

YES (Female)

- More experience in the working field.

- I learned more in two years in LCA than I did in my first three years in secondary school, I was never really good in school. I wanted to learn when I got into LCA, I always had my projects done and any home work, I enjoyed getting up in the mornings to go to school I never felt like that before.

- The interviews and constant assessments were great for building my confidence.

- Helped my confidence in interviews and around others because I was so used to both situations.

- The work place is all about communication. LCA is all about that and team work.

- It prepared me what to expect in the working industry.

- I was able to socialise better and I was quite professional in the work placements.

- It prepares you for all areas not just one. In traditional Leaving Cert it is just basic.

- It helped me a lot by the work experience and the ongoing assessments specially the setting up a business task.

- LCA really matured me and gave me a great experience of the working world by interviews, tasks, targets, continuous assessments and attendance and punctuality. It really prepared me for the working world.

- Through the work experience and the tasks it prepared me.

- It helped me in the way that I done four work experience placements and it has helped me to choose my career.

NO (*Three graduates answered NO. All three were female. Only one included a comment*)

- I think LCA didn't educate more than already done in Junior cert.

Question 18

Have you ever been refused a course or a job because you did LCA rather than the traditional Leaving Certificate? If Yes please give details

Male

- Yes and no. I failed to get in a degree course in Ireland. I applied for six degree courses in England and I was rejected from only one university there.

- LCA students are only open to PLC courses not degree.

Female

- No – I have not been refused any of the jobs I applied for.

(These were the only comments received)

Question 19

Have you ever spoken to an employer who did not know what LCA is?
If Yes please give details.

Male

- Older employers don't know what it is.

- I had to explain what the course is.

- He never heard of it so I had to explain it.

- When I was on work experience the employer didn't know what it was.

Female

- Current employer I have now didn't know what it was.

- Most people don't know what LCA is, people have heard of it but think it is just something for stupid people. I take pleasure in proving them wrong and telling them it's far from that.

- I was asked about it in an interview. They didn't know.

- I had an interview for Mr. _____ and I had to explain what LCA was.

- They kinda knew about it from word of mouth but I was able to explain it. To give information about it to them.

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- They did not know because they never had any LCA students in their business and it wasn't out long. (Comment from a 2003 graduate)

- They didn't know anything about it, another one didn't realise it could have been my choice to do LCA.

- My manager was asking me about it as she thought that there was only one Leaving Cert.

Comment from a graduate who had answered NO

- Some employers rather that I did LCA as it gave more practice on just basic.

Question No 22

If you had done Transition Year do you think you would have stayed in school to complete your Leaving Certificate?   YES/NO

Please explain:

NO

- Probably would have left. I hated school before LCA. Be in some job I hate by now I reckon.

- It would have taken too long to do the Leaving Cert.

- Didn't like studying.

- I didn't think TY was a good idea because it is classed as a doss year.

- I didn't really like school I wanted to get out and see what the working world was like.

- Not motivated enough to do study. Lack of attention.

- I just don't think I would have been able for studying things I don't need after I leave school, I'm better at practical stuff.

- Because I almost left LCA in second year and my tutor helped me through it.

- I didn't like TY.

- I just didn't like school I felt LCA was a bit more adventurous and exciting.

- I'm too active couldn't relax in class and LCA had more activity.

- I don't think I would have stayed because I think I would have got bored in TY not being in class and learning new things.

- Because I found in junior that I didn't want to stay in school and when I heard about TY with fashion shows and all their trips I thought it sounded good. But at the end of the day how was fashion shows and trips going to be relevant to me. I wanted to get out and work and LCA gave me all the experience I needed. I definitely wouldn't of stayed and completed TY.

- I probably would not have a good attendance so I would be missing out on work that is important.

YES

- TY would give a break from exams.

- I very rarely quit halfway through something.

- If you asked me in third year I'd have said no but I matured as a person more towards the end of secondary school as did everyone, and realised how important me finishing school actually was.

- I always want to finish things I start.

- School is very important to have.

- Because you need some sort of qualification or Leaving Cert. to fall back on.

- Because I'd get a job easier with my Leaving Cert.

- Because I could not have left school without a LC behind me.

- Because I did do TY.

- Doing the LC would have given me more options in the working area.

- No matter what Leaving Cert. we choose it is almost vital for females to have the qualification to have a successful future.

- I would have done a Leaving Cert. either way. I think I was too young to make the decision.

- My parents wouldn't allow me to leave.

- I come from a big family I have four older brothers who didn't complete their school cycle so I wanted to achieve that. I also wanted to have good school history for when I was to get a job after school.

- Just so I would have it behind me but I wouldn't have enjoyed it.

- I would have stayed because I am not stupid enough to leave school plus my parents would not let me leave.

Question No 26

How did you find having to have 90% attendance? Fair? Unfair? Please explain.

Fair

- It helps everyone to be in everyday.

- It would make you come to school.

- A traditional Leaving Cert could still pass his Leaving Cert. and have a bad attendance record.

- In working life 100% attendance is expected.

- In the real world if you don't reach this type of punctuality you won't last long so it set me up well and got me disciplined to this day, so could only be a good thing.

- Since we don't do much homework nearly everything was done in the classroom so you must be in.

- It's like having to work because you have to be in work everyday.

- Very important to go to school so you don't miss out on work and fall behind.

- If you were sick and had a cert. it was not counted so there was no reason to miss 10% of the year also a lot of tasks were group driven so if you weren't in all the time nobody in your group could rely on you.

- Because it meant you had to be there all the time and you hardly ever fell behind in your work.

- Had to attend as to make sure I got the best results as possible.

- Get you used to attend everyday in your work, I think the attendance helped me prepare for my job.

- If you don't attend you lose credits and don't learn.

- Because you got the chance to finish all the work you had.

- Because it helps now that I'm working.

- It was very easy for me because I didn't live that far from the school.

- All students no matter which leaving should have 90% at least to achieve anything.

- I found it fair because it prepares you for when you go out and get a job its more or less the same where I'm working now.

- It teaches you for later life when you're in employment where you're expected to have 100% attendance.

- I found it really hard then but understand now why.

- If you miss a day you miss a lot of skills and communication.

- Because if you missed classes you had a lot to catch up on and it wasn't fair on the rest of the class.

- I found it an exciting challenge with all my classmates to see who could keep the 90% attendance. We all got very competitive about it.

- I knew I had to be in school all the time where as when you're in 1st to 3rd year you say to yourself "ah I can miss tomorrow".

- Because we knew we had to be in in order to pass. In traditional you don't need full attendance in that case I wouldn't bother coming in.

- It gives you an idea about what employers expect from you and how to be a good employee.

- I thought at the start it was hard but then I found it brilliant because when I left school I was going to need it in other education and jobs. So it prepared me very well.

- If some one was out it meant having to wait for them because they still had to do the work and we couldn't move on.

- I think that this is good because it keeps you attending school.

- Because all the class work is important and relevant to tasks and assignments etc.

Unfair (Only one comment) (Male)

- Felt like it was more of a threat, I was told if I wasn't in everyday I'd fail the course.

Question 27

What things did you like most about LCA?

Male

- Students friends trips and work experience.

- Small class.

- There were so many things the course was just perfect. It helped people who thought they didn't have a future. It gave them more options in what they wanted to do.

- Continuous assessment, tasks, deadlines.

- The atmosphere with students and the relationship it developed with teachers.

- Teachers were very helpful.

- I liked work experience.

- The people and the course.

- Not having to worry as much about final exams.

- Work experience, teachers, the different types of assignments and tasks.

- The interaction between students and teachers, being able to show my ability in practical work as well as written.

- Treated like an adult, gud laugh, work not too hard, fair chance by all the teachers.

- The laugh I had with all my fellow classmates.

- Having the continuous assessment because you weren't judged on exam results.

- The tasks.

- The computer course.

- I loved everything about LCA I really enjoyed doing tasks and assignments I really enjoyed the classes they were good and exciting and something new all the time so you never got bored.

Female

- Class, work experience, tasks allowed me to be prepared for the continuous ones I am and had to complete for college.

- Computers and Home Ec, I enjoyed.

- I loved every aspect of LCA, it was the best thing I ever done I didn't want to leave.

- I liked the different tasks we did and the outings we went on.

- The tasks I loved that. It was like a target to get it has made me interested in jobs and daily life.

- The class the tasks the teachers the lot.

- Got on well with teachers I have good computer skills.

- Going out and having a laugh as a group. Doing all the tasks and key assignments.

- Socialising, tasks, work experience, social ed, office skills, voc. prep., computers etc. you were also treated very fairly like an adult.

- It was good craic got on well with teachers, a very practical approach, more prepared for college than Leaving Cert. students.

- Work experience and not having much homework.

- Work experience.

- Work experience smaller classes and tasks.

- The work experience and the trips to different places.

- The trips we went on and the tasks that we had to do as part of the course.

Question No 28

What things did you like least about LCA?

Male

- Some projects didn't suit me.

- The way there was a bit of a stigma. Some people look down on the course.

- Irish and French course should have been done over the two years I lost what Irish I had in 5LCA by graduation.

- As far as I can remember we were not told a great deal about the career options from LCA or college options after LCA.

- The fact that most or all of our work had to be done up on the computer and as I didn't have one at home I found it very difficult.

- Some fellow students were very disruptive.

- None.

- Tasks were rushed sometimes because of deadlines.

- The way you can't do degree courses right away.

- You had to do a lot of writing and a lot of research for tasks.

- I didn't dislike anything about the course.

- Modules pressure.

- People from the traditional LC looking down on me because of being in LCA.

- The interviews after the tasks.

- The task because there was a lot of pressure.

- The PE.

- The tasks and the teaching were very simple. For me the course didn't have any challenges.

Female

- People not having the knowledge of the course. People believing its not a real Leaving Cert.

- The way it made me feel I was not doing a proper LC. There was a bit of a stigma about it.

- We could have been a bit more involved with our friends in TY instead of feeling left out.

- None.

- I don't think LCA was a challenge in any way. Too easy.

- Nothing.

- Some of the students didn't put a lot of effort in they just wanted to get out of the school asap.

- Nothing.

- The ongoing assessments tasks were a bit tiring but it got me ready for hairdressing as you are assessed often so it was good in the end.

- I personally found it very difficult when I had to go into an interview about my tasks. I just used to feel so nervous because it was strangers. It might have been better if it was our own teacher or yearhead

- PE.

- How there was no colour printer. I didn't not like alot about the programme.

- The only thing I hated about LCA was the assignments as you only had an amount of time to do them.

- The people in my class and the stigma about being in LCA.

QUESTION 29

Were you advised about the choice of jobs and courses available to you after you completed LCA? YES/NO

If Yes who advised you. *You may tick more than one box.*

Guidance Counsellor	
LCA Co-ordinator	
Tutor	
Teachers	
Parents	
Friends	
Other	

If Other please explain:

Male

- I researched the sports course and also researched the ECDL course which I done in Belfast.

Female

- Past students of course.

- A job exhibition in the RDS.

- Also principals from further education colleges.

- My career guidance teacher showed me a lot of different courses in different colleges.

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