An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Programme Evaluation
Transition Year (TY)
REPORT

Coláiste Iognáid
Sea Road, Galway
Roll Number: 62970K

Date of inspection: 14 April 2011
EVALUATION OF THE TRANSITION YEAR (TY) PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

This report has been written following an evaluation of the Transition Year (TY) programme in Coláiste Iognáid, Galway. It presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for the further development of the programme in the school. During the evaluation, the inspector held meetings with the school principal, a core group of teachers and with a small group of students. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector liaised extensively with the programme coordinator and visited classrooms to observe teaching and learning. The inspector provided oral feedback to teachers on lessons observed. The inspector also examined students’ work and reviewed relevant documentation pertaining to the programme, as well as teachers’ written preparation. The outcomes of the evaluation were discussed with the school principal following the evaluation. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

The TY programme is the only programme offered at senior cycle in the school in addition to the established Leaving Certificate (LC). The programme is offered on a compulsory basis. The programme was offered for the first time in 1988 and there are 110 students currently following the programme, organised in four mixed-ability groups.

1 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME ORGANISATION

1.1 Whole school support

Whole school support for the TY programme is good. The senior management team are strong advocates of the educational, social and personal benefits derived by students from the programme, in particular the contribution that TY makes to living out the Jesuit mission statement of the school throughout the school community. Currently there are thirty-two teachers involved in the delivery of the programme and TY is frequently included as an item at staff meetings. The majority of teachers of TY are familiar with the programme guidelines and ethos. However, there has not been any opportunity to have whole-staff continuous professional development (CPD) regarding TY in the past number of years. It is recommended that whole-staff CPD for TY be organised. In the interim staff should be made aware the website of the TY support service at www.tytpn.ie where various materials may be downloaded. In addition, there are courses provided in local education centres that are specifically aimed at aspects of delivering the TY programme.

Two post holders comprise the co-ordination team in the capacities of co-ordinator and of year head.

School management recently conducted a comprehensive evaluation of TY including all stakeholders and commendably sought advice for improvement from another Jesuit school.

1.2 Resources

Resources are used well to support the implementation of the programme in the school. Teachers are appropriately assigned to deliver the curriculum. Timetabling for the various subjects and modules is generally good. However a number of issues in this regard need to be reviewed. First, students participate in a social outreach programme at various times during timetabled classes...
throughout the week except on Thursdays. In addition there are no set blocks for work experience and some students also go on language exchange trips at different times throughout the school year. The result of these practices is that a full complement of students is not in attendance for timetabled classes which also constrains teachers from making progress through the planned programmes of work. The average percentage of students in attendance in the classes observed was fifty-five with the highest attendance being sixty-seven and the lowest forty-two. It is recommended that structures are put in place to allow for social outreach, work experience and language exchanges to proceed in a more streamlined and organised manner that does not compromise the delivery of the planned programmes in the various subjects and modules. It would also be beneficial to agree a maximum number of monthly calendar activities for TY at whole-staff level in the context of other school activities. The majority of planned TY calendar activities should be notified to the parents or guardians of TY students at the beginning of the year with the general school calendar.

There is no dedicated office for TY programme co-ordination. In the context of an average of eighteen per cent of the student population following the programme in any given year, it is recommended that, as resources allow, a room be made available for the purposes of co-ordinating TY activities.

In keeping with good practice, the school’s information and communication technology (ICT) facilities are used well in organising and in implementing the programme. All facilities and specialist rooms are also made available to TY modules and activities. Commendably, the school’s autistic unit is included in the TY social outreach programme.

The TY capitation funds are used effectively to fund workshops, subsidise outings and cover other costs associated with the programme. A voluntary contribution is requested from parents or guardians in respect of some of the activities which are part of the programme. It is recommended that parents or guardians be provided with a sample costing of the programme at the TY information evening prior to the commencement of the programme. This sample costing should also be included in the written plan.

1.3 Student selection and support

The school’s admission policy in relation to TY states that ‘TY is an integral part of the education provided by the school. It is expected that all students will follow the TY programme’. It is recommended that this wording be reviewed so as to reflect the compulsory nature of TY. Students and parents are provided with good quality information and supports regarding the programme and its benefits.

There is an effective induction programme in place for TY students at the start of the year. To build on this good practice, it is recommended that the publication Student Induction in Transition Year: A Guide for Co-ordinators, available on the previously mentioned TY website, be used to extend the existing induction programme. Other supports which facilitate participation in TY include the daily availability of the TY coordinator, and the TY year head, who play a key role in supporting the care of this cohort within the context of a whole-school student-support system. It was evident from attendance at lessons that appropriate gender balance has been maintained in the formation of each class group.

Each TY group is provided with two periods of timetabled guidance and two periods of personal and social health education per week on an eight week modular basis. However the guidance plan reviewed as part of the evaluation does not reflect this and the scheme does not include an
appropriate balance between the areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance, as outlined in Circular PPT 12/05. This should be reviewed to reflect the practice on the ground. There is no detail on what diagnostic testing is carried out or when such is conducted during the TY year. It was reported that the Differential Aptitude Tests (DATS) are conducted during the TY year. It is recommended that DATS be carried out early in the year to allow the outcomes of the DATS to inform student choices during work experience. The preparation of students for work placements and the debriefing after the work experience period is facilitated within guidance lessons.

Given the large number of students who participate in the programme, it is not possible for all students to participate in all calendar activities. Although equal access is promoted, it is recommended that the criteria for selection to participate in these activities be documented and shared with the students. Students should be selected according to these criteria by the core team.

Students with special educational needs (SEN) are provided with additional support on an individual basis. Two students are catered for in the autism spectrum disorders (ASD) unit and take part in a limited number of TY activities. TY students commendably work with students in the unit as part of the social outreach programme. All teachers have received in-service on inclusion of SEN students within the mainstream setting. It is recommended that other methodologies outlined in the guidelines of the Department of Education and Science, Inclusion of students with Special Educational Needs and on www.sess.ie should be explored as alternative models of delivery.

1.4 Home-school links

Home-school interactions are of a good quality throughout the programme. There is frequent contact maintained with parents through information evenings, a TY overview booklet, school reports, information letters, newsletters, invitations to school-based events, the school’s website and the TY end-of-year awards evening. Parental support for the annual careers day, the work experience programme and the language exchange programmes facilitates further contact. The recent school evaluation of the TY programme included a parent questionnaire, in line with best practice.

2 QUALITY OF PROGRAMME PLANNING AND COORDINATION

2.1 Planning

The documentation reviewed as part of the evaluation provided some insights into the organisational details of the programme and a brief overview of the subjects and modules delivered was also made available. This plan is not in line with Department guidelines: Transition Year Programme, Guidelines for Schools. Individual subject overviews are inadequate and should be developed in accordance with Writing the Transition Year Programme. Therefore it is recommended that a whole-staff approach is adopted to develop a single cohesive and current document with all areas of the guidelines addressed. Teachers should be afforded the facility to review TY planning at subject department level, and should develop appropriate subject plans. An analysis of the school’s recent comprehensive TY evaluation of students, teachers and parents will provide an appropriate staring point for the planning process. The national aims of TY set out in the guidelines should provide the overarching framework within which this ongoing work is carried out.
2.2 Coordination

TY co-ordination duties are extensive and include the following tasks: organisation and planning of the programme, liaising with the whole-school community and maintaining records and reports. The co-ordinator operates an open-door policy in relation to students and relationships with students on the programme are based on mutual respect and courtesy. The co-ordinator is committed to providing a programme that provides students with a wide variety of experiences, challenges and opportunities. The co-ordinator is assisted in the day-to-day management and running of the programme by the TY year head, who carries out these duties in a dedicated manner. Liaison between the co-ordinator and the year head relies on much informal communication and would benefit from a formal schedule of meetings. There was evidence of a lack of cohesion and communication between senior management and the co-ordination team in relation to TY activities. It is recommended that the role of the co-ordinator and the TY year head be delineated as part of the planned review of the post structure in the school. It is also recommended that management, through timetabling and teacher allocation, create a core team to develop structures to sustain the good quality programme that is currently in evidence. The core team once established should meet formally to oversee the implementation, evaluation and review of the planned programme. It is suggested that minuted core team meetings will provide an important record of key decisions taken in relation to TY and provide the basis on which all staff are kept up-to-date on TY related activities.

In addition to the information regarding TY students and TY activities available electronically, a calendar of activities should be posted in the staff room on a dedicated TY notice board. A student notice board should also be allocated a central position in the main school building in the interest of promoting communication in relation to TY activities among the whole-school community.

2.3 Curriculum

The four layers of core, sampling, modular and calendar events are present in the curriculum offered and commendably foster personal, cultural, civic, social and vocational awareness as well as developing students’ skills beyond the classroom. This is in keeping with the national TY ethos and with the aims set out in the school’s TY plan.

While the core provision is good, however it was not possible to establish from the TY plans reviewed that all subjects provided in the school as part of the established leaving certificate (ELC) are sampled as part of the TY programme. It is recommended that plans be reviewed, to reflect the extent to which students are sampling subjects, in particular Business and Biology.

The social outreach programme is fundamental to the TY experience in the school and students also articulated the benefits derived by them from work experience and language exchanges. A more structured approach recommended above to these aspects of the programme and the calendar of activities will ensure that all four layers are delivered in a more equitable manner.
3 QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Planning and preparation

A good level of planning and preparation characterised the majority of lessons evaluated. A minority of lessons lacked definite learning outcomes, a purposeful pace and a developmental structure. Best practice was observed where targeted learning outcomes were shared with the students and learning outcomes were differentiated for students new to the subject and those with previous experience of the subject. Where teacher-generated learning and teaching aids were employed these positively impacted on students’ engagement with the subject matter and contributed to students’ learning. It is recommended that all teachers be mindful of the need to engage in short-term planning and preparation so as to achieve the greatest number of learning possibilities for the range of abilities present in all class groups.

3.2 Learning and teaching

Good whole-class teaching interspersed judiciously with teacher-student questioning was the predominant teaching methodology used during the evaluation. These good questioning techniques encouraged student contributions at different levels of ability, elicited links with previous learning, and motivated students to make connections with their own experience of the world.

A good balance was achieved in almost all lessons between whole-class teaching and students working either individually or in pairs on assigned tasks. Preparatory work to assist students to carry out tasks was carried out effectively in all classes and in almost all classes teachers attended to the learning needs of students as they completed tasks either individually or in pairs. It is recommended that teachers in all lessons should circulate to attend to students’ learning needs as they complete tasks. In one lesson, where students were working in groups on a case study, a very good debriefing session followed and feedback from all groups was recorded on the board. This good practice is recommended at a conclusion to all task-based activities.

In half the lessons observed, teachers showed a cognisance of the need to build students’ grasp of subject-specific vocabulary and general principles. In one lesson, students were explicitly taught learning strategies as a means of memorising subject vocabulary. Such good practices should be a feature of all lessons.

Classroom management was effective and discipline was sensitively maintained in all lessons. Students’ contributions were affirmed in a positive manner and their participation in lessons was encouraged. The students were co-operative in their work. Continuity with previous lessons was not in evidence in all lessons evaluated due to student absences.

A number of specialist rooms and general classrooms were visited during the evaluation period. Some rooms had been enhanced with print and image rich posters, diagrams and other teaching and learning aids. In the case of all rooms visited, there is scope to develop the physical environment for teaching and learning. In the case of one room visited as part of the evaluation, it is recommended that the upkeep and cleaning of this room be in keeping with standards observed elsewhere throughout the school.
3.3 Assessment

Of the eight subjects evaluated, students had maintained folders of work in two subject areas on a sustained basis over the school year. A good amount of developmental work was evident in the random sample of the folders reviewed in these two subject areas. It was reported that teachers hold student folders in all other areas of study and a sample of these folders was not made available as part of the evaluation. It is recommended that the practice of teachers retaining student folders be reviewed and that students maintain a log of their work in all subject areas to foster independence in learners, a key tenet of the TY philosophy.

Summative examinations are conducted twice during the school year for TY students and reports issue to homes based on these examinations. An annual parent-teacher meeting is organised. It is suggested that students should also attend this meeting in the interest of promoting negotiated learning, a central tenet of the TY philosophy. Testing of students is also conducted throughout the year at the end of modules. Student participation in outreach activities and general engagement with the programme determines the certificate awarded to the student. TY certificates are graded with commendation, merit or distinction. Students also receive additional certification in some of the modules and activities completed during the year. Parents support TY events and attend the awards ceremony where student achievement is celebrated by the entire school community.

The formative assessment of students includes project work and student presentations. Agreed criteria should be developed pertaining to the compilation of projects and presentations across all areas of study. Once developed these criteria should be communicated to students to ensure that students learn these two skills in a cross-curricular manner. The successful adherence to the criteria will also depend on the co-operation of teachers. Further information in relation to AfL is available on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at www.ncca.ie. The school has developed a comprehensive homework policy. It is recommended that this policy be reviewed to include practices in relation to homework during TY.

Subject and module plans contained very little detail in relation to assessment practices. In order to generate greater consistency to assessment, an accreditation system to acknowledge students’ learning and engagement across the range of areas studied should be considered to bring together improved summative and formative assessment approaches. Details of such a system are available on the TY support website. Once developed they should be included in all subject and module plans and should be communicated to the students. In the case of languages taught as part of the programme, the European Language Portfolio, a log of language learning, is recommended as a common approach to the learning and teaching of the languages. Information in this regard is provided at www.coe.int/portfolio.

4 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Whole-school support for the TY programme is good.
- Resources are used well to support the implementation of the programme in the school.
- Home-school interactions are of a good quality during the TY year.
- The co-ordinator is committed to providing a programme that provides students with a wide variety of experiences, challenges and opportunities.
• Good quality teaching and learning methodologies characterised the majority of lessons evaluated.

As a means of building on these strengths the following key recommendations are made:

• Whole staff CPD for TY should be organised to support planning for TY at programme and subject level.
• Organisational structures need to be put in place to allow for social outreach, work experience and language exchanges to proceed in a more streamlined manner that does not compromise the delivery of the planned programmes in the various subjects and modules.
• The current provision for guidance during TY should be reviewed to ensure an appropriate balance between the areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance, as outlined in Circular PPT 12/05.
• The criteria for student selection to participate in modular and calendar activities should be documented and shared with the students.
• The roles of the co-ordinator and of the TY year head should be delineated as part of the planned review of the post structure in the school. A core team for TY is recommended and once established it should meet formally and agreed minutes of core-team meetings should be shared at whole-staff meetings.
Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

Area 2  Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.

Foreign Language Exchange trips and work experience have been streamlined as they will now take place during designated weeks which have been communicated to all stakeholders.

Social outreach is now confined to Thursday and Friday mornings, thus preserving the integrity of the academic subject teaching time.

Staff room and website TY calendar clearly display monthly activities.

Wording of admissions policy has been modified to reflect the compulsory status of TY.

DATS will take place earlier this year, to enable feedback before students make their subject choices for Leaving Cert.

Whole staff CPD in service for TY will take place in advance of the next academic year as recommended.

Homework Policy will be reviewed to reflect practices in relation to homework during TY, as recommended.

A staff core team for TY has been established and they hold regular minuted meetings. Decisions are reported back and communicated to all staff.

The guidance plan has been reviewed to include recommendations and this has been clearly communicated to all stakeholders.

The roles of the TY co-ordinator and year head will be delineated as part of the Review of Posts of Responsibility which is currently underway.

School management is endeavouring to address the issue of a planning area for co-ordinator.