

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT**

**Saint Mary's College
Rathmines, Dublin 6
Roll number: 60560E**

Date of inspection: 3 November 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN BUSINESS SUBJECTS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Mary's College Rathmines. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in business subjects and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of these subjects in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students' work, and had discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers' written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal, deputy principal and subject teachers. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

In St. Mary's College there is good provision in business education. Business Studies at junior cycle is a core subject on the curriculum. Leaving Certificate students are offered the three business subjects of Accounting, Business and Economics, and uptake is high. Students in the compulsory Transition Year (TY) programme take a ten-week module in each of the three business subjects on the Leaving Certificate curriculum.

Three single class periods are allocated to Business Studies in first year and there are four single periods for the remainder of the junior cycle. Classes are evenly spread throughout the week ensuring regular teacher contact. Nevertheless, it is recommended that a double period be provided at some point at junior cycle. This will facilitate the teaching of book-keeping as some topics may require a double period to ensure completion. TY students have a double period each week. Leaving Certificate students taking business subjects on the mainstream curriculum are provided with one double and three single class periods. Business along with a number of other subjects is offered as an eighth Leaving Certificate examination subject. Students availing of this have one double period. The additional work that this entails is discussed with the students and their parents. It is advisable to regularly evaluate this arrangement as it offers little class contact time for teacher and students, and has implications for the delivery of other subjects.

Classrooms are teacher-based and these *de facto* business classrooms are valuable learning environments where print rich resources and student projects can be displayed. While there were some displays of business related material in business classrooms there is scope to further develop these classrooms as visually stimulating environments. Resources such as business related magazines, books and audio visual resources are located in business teachers' classrooms and in the school library. Each business teacher is allocated a yearly budget which facilitates the purchases of teaching aids and resources. To enhance this good practice it is advisable to include in planning documentation a catalogue of all available resources and note their location so as to facilitate their shared use within the business department.

The school's Information and Communications Technology (ICT) facilities are very good. Computer suites are available for class and individual student use. All business classrooms have interactive whiteboards or data projectors (DP) and laptops.

All teachers of the business subjects are subject specialists. Senior management facilitates attendance at available in-service as a means of updating skills and knowledge and gives financial support for professional development activities and membership of professional associations. However, no member of the business subjects department is currently a member of the Business Studies Teachers Association of Ireland (BSTAI). In the context of continuing professional development it is advisable that business teachers join the BSTAI and regularly access the website of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) to attain resources that may be useful in their teaching practice.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Senior management is proactive in its encouragement and support of collaborative subject planning. A co-ordinator who has a clearly defined role oversees the planning work of the six teachers in the business subjects department. Formal planning time is assigned once a year and it is planned to increase the frequency of these meetings. Minutes are kept on the outcomes of these meetings. Informal meetings also take place within the subject department on a needs basis in relation to subject or student matters. The business teachers have stated in their subject planning documentation that "on a regular basis teachers should reflect on their teaching practice with the aim of building on strengths and improving on weaknesses". To enhance this good practice teachers may consider the use of a diagnostic window to evaluate the workings of the business subjects department.

A business subject plan has been developed by the business teachers. The plan has all the elements of good planning as outlined in the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). The business teachers have documented the key principles that guide the collaborative operation of their subject department. Curriculum plans are in place for each business subject provided in the school. In the curriculum plan for first-year Business Studies the linking of the learning outcomes to each topic is particularly good. However, the yearly scheme of work for Business Studies was compiled by three different teachers and as a result some topics were omitted from the plan. The curriculum plan for Business Studies should therefore be reviewed in its entirety. To enhance all of the curriculum plans for business subjects it is recommended that learning outcomes, methodologies, resources, homework and assessment be aligned to each curriculum topic. This will ensure that students will all have a similar classroom experience, which is especially important at junior cycle.

There are curriculum plans for each of the ten-week business modules provided in TY. The Accounting module exposes students to computerised accounts and this is good practice as it links the theoretical skills gained from Business Studies to the real life environment. The Business module seeks to introduce students to management skills and activities and to the enterprise economy. As part of this module students carry out a paper-based exercise to develop a product or service, from idea generation to sales in the market place. However, it is difficult to give students a meaningful and practical experience of enterprise in ten weeks. This provision could be revisited as part of the school's yearly review of the TY programme, in the interest of giving students a worthwhile experience of enterprise. In the Economics module students sample some of the topics on the Leaving Certificate curriculum and explore the relevance of Economics in our society.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Nine lessons were observed as part of this inspection. They included a Business Studies lesson from each year of the junior cycle and lessons in Accounting, Business and Economics. While business education was not timetabled for TY on either day of the inspection, the inspector met with a TY class group to discuss their experience of business education.

Teaching and learning was good in all lessons observed, as was individual teacher planning. Resources used in lessons included textbooks, notes, handouts and prepared ICT resources. Lessons had a good structure and were paced appropriately for the mixed ability nature of class groups. Learning outcomes were outlined at the start of the lesson. In many lessons, a review of homework provided the link with previous learning and the introduction of new material to achieve the learning outcomes. Homework was assigned at the end of each lesson observed.

Most teachers used an appropriate blend of active and traditional methodologies to progress student learning. The methodologies used in lessons observed included pair work, use of graphic organisers, questioning, quizzes, class discussions, teacher-led discussions and use of ICT.

A very good step-by-step approach was adopted in lessons that had an accounting focus. Teachers offered individual support to students in addition to checking progress on questions. In one lesson there was good use of paired work as a method to deepen student learning. Students' presentation of work was neat and good as it mirrored teachers' practice. Data and overhead projectors were effectively employed by teachers to display worked examples and solutions to questions.

Very effective teacher questioning was used in most lessons where it successfully differentiated learning. In all lessons observed, a range of global, targeted, higher-order and lower-order questions were used. Teacher questioning allowed students to interpret questions and to discuss a range of solutions. Good practice was noted in a lesson where students had to employ higher-order critical thinking to speculate on an appropriate formula for a given economic outcome. Students' answering was positively affirmed in all lessons observed.

ICT was used effectively in several lessons as it and successfully enhanced learning for the student. Data projectors were used to display solutions to student homework assignments, to display graphs, documents and other material, to link to business websites and to air video. In a lesson at junior cycle a "*Who wants to be a millionaire?*" quiz format was very well used to summarise a topic and to re-enforce learning, and it was clearly enjoyed by students. The use of ICT by teachers in this manner is laudable.

It was evident from student interactions with teachers and the inspector that students had good business knowledge and understanding. Students were proficient in applying this knowledge and understanding to everyday business life situations. In most lessons teachers made good references to local and national business enterprises, entrepreneurs and issues. This good practice allows students to develop their business acumen. It was noted from business planning documentation that the weekly fifth-year career talks can be used as a business resource; however more formal links could be made with the local business environment as a means of deepening students' understanding of business-related matters.

In most lessons a range of pedagogical approaches was used to engage students in their learning. Business teachers noted in their subject planning documentation the "utilisation where practicable of innovative and creative pedagogical teaching practice". In keeping with this praiseworthy aim

it is recommended that the use of learning methodologies such as role play and group work be expanded throughout the business subject department.

ASSESSMENT

The business teachers operate a homework and assessment approach in line with whole-school policy. Students sit formal assessments at Christmas and the end of the academic year. Students in all junior and senior cycles are also informally assessed on the completion of each curriculum topic. Attainment in TY is measured by the subject teacher and includes an evaluation of projects completed during the year. At the time of the inspection a common paper was not administered for formal assessments; however, the business subjects department has identified common assessment as desirable and will discuss its introduction at their next meeting. A good reporting system is operated in the school as every three weeks parents are informed of their sons' academic progress via their homework journal. Teachers maintain records of all assessment outcomes and these along with student progression in business subjects are communicated to parents by written reports and at parent-teacher meetings.

In all lessons evaluated students were assigned homework. However, as evidenced from a sample of homework journals and homework copybooks from each lesson, this practice is not consistently followed. Good practice was noted where teachers ensured that homework journals were used to record work given and that students had a specific copybook for homework and the work therein was checked for completion and duly corrected. In some class groups there was scope to increase the quantity and regularity of assigned homework for students. A minority of teachers corrected students' work and gave evaluative comments. This is good practice particularly at Leaving Certificate as it encourages students to improve their performance. In this context, it is recommended that the subject department review its homework policy and practices so that all students receive regular well-monitored homework. It is advisable to include Assessment for Learning (AfL) techniques for use in the business subjects department as this will enhance the learning experience for students. The website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment www.ncca.ie provides information on AfL that may be helpful to the business subject department.

The standard and maintenance of copybooks varied widely. While there were many good exhibits, neatness, layout, headings and labelling required attention. As these are important in business it is advisable that procedures be put in place to improve presentation skills.

Business students are challenged and encouraged to aim for high academic standards and to take business subjects at the highest possible level in the certificate examinations and as a result uptake at higher level is very good. The outcomes in state examinations are good and they are analysed by the principal and communicated to the board of management. This analysis should be communicated to the business subjects department for further analysis and comparison to national norms. This work should form part of the annual review of the work of the business subjects department and help to inform future practice.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Business subjects have a high profile on the curriculum offered in St. Mary's College and student uptake of business subject at Leaving Certificate level is very good.

- Senior management supports subject department planning and the business subjects department is willing to embrace and develop subject planning in a collaborative manner.
- Lessons were planned well with a good structure and at an appropriate pace for student learning.
- Teaching and learning was good in lessons observed.
- Business students are challenged and encouraged to aim for high academic standards and to take business subjects at the highest possible level in the certificate examinations. Outcomes in state examinations are good.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- At least one double period should be provided at some point in junior cycle for practical exercises in bookkeeping.
- In the curriculum plans of business subjects, learning outcomes should be matched with the methodologies and resources required to teach the topic, and these should be aligned to the homework and assessment modes used to evaluate student's understanding.
- The use of active and co-operative learning methodologies should be increased where appropriate.
- Homework policy and practices should be reviewed so that all business students on a regular basis experience a similar allocation of homework

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of business subjects and with the principal, and deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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