

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Business Subjects  
REPORT**

**St. Raphael's College,  
Loughrea,  
Co. Galway  
Roll number: 63070C**

**Date of inspection: 6 October 2010**



**A N R O I N N    D E P A R T M E N T O F  
O I D E A C H A I S    E D U C A T I O N  
A G U S S C I L E A N N A    A N D S K I L L S**

**REPORT**  
**ON**  
**THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN BUSINESS SUBJECTS**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Raphael's College, Loughrea. 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 and subject teachers. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

Junior and senior cycle provision in business includes Business Studies, Business and Accounting, which is currently available only in sixth year. Transition Year (TY) provision is enterprise focused. Time allocation at junior cycle meets guidelines. Four periods for the subject in first year is very good and maximises student and teacher opportunities for learning and teaching. The current structure of double periods for the second and third year in junior cycle is well utilised by teachers to focus on the bookkeeping aspects of the junior cycle syllabus. The time allocated to senior cycle business subjects is very good with an alternating five or six periods in each year of the cycle.

Participation rates in the subject at junior cycle are improving as evidenced by the current pattern of Business Studies uptake. As the number of students taking senior cycle business options without having taken the subject at junior cycle is low, business subject selection at senior cycle should be regularly monitored to ensure that Accounting is not always selected by more able students. It is also important to ensure that students who have not studied Business Studies at junior cycle are not precluded from taking senior cycle business options. One method of supporting students' optional subject selection is for the subject teachers to take a more proactive role in providing information to students on senior cycle options, for example compiling an information sheet describing the subjects, the benefits of taking them and possible future study and career options.

Usually business classes are organised on a mixed-ability basis. This is consistent with the whole-school approach for all subjects except Irish, English and Mathematics. In the current second year however, one of the Business Studies class groups has been designated as an ordinary-level group. The inspector raised concerns about the departure from the mixed-ability format as the rationale for the departure and the method of student selection for the groups were not clear. Also of concern was that, while the team have stated that the opportunity is available to all students to take the course at higher level, the scheme of work has been modified with learning outcomes

reduced which will have a consequential impact on pace and pitch of teaching. Consideration must also be given to the long-term impact of this decision on senior cycle and the team are advised to continue with mixed-ability groups for Business Studies in future years.

School management ensures that teachers are assigned to classes for each complete cycle. Rotation of teachers at senior cycle has improved and this needs to be maintained to ensure that the skill base of teachers of the subjects is preserved. Some teachers are more active than others in terms of involvement with the subject association and school management is supportive of teachers' membership of the subject association.

The teachers' level of expertise in information and communication technology (ICT) varies but all have made an effort to store and file materials and resources electronically. However, the variance in skill level means that those teachers with more developed skills and access to the ICT room have better opportunity to introduce students to the application of ICT to business learning outcomes. Therefore, there is a need to prioritise the business department when new ICT resources come on stream if the subject is to reflect the dynamic nature of the wider business environment. This will also progress the use of ICT within the teaching of the subjects and will allow for the pooling of resources.

First-year students have timetabled access to ICT, which is very good practice. The business teachers indicated that they have tried to increase the Business Studies focus of the ICT module. There is potential to achieve this through the completion of an ICT-based project at the start of second year. The focus of this project could be the revision of first-year learning outcomes as is currently set out as an activity in the second-year scheme of work.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The approach to subject planning is very good with evidence of review and self evaluation. There is very good collaboration among teachers and the post of co-ordinator rotates among the team members. It is suggested that the tenure of the co-ordinator increase to a two-year period to provide greater continuity and opportunity to engage with the change agenda if one is determined.

There is some evidence of a willingness among teachers to vary the plans from the syllabus sequence. This is more evident at junior cycle, in particular the first-year programme, and is evidence of the team's capacity for reflective practice. While overall objectives are taken and occasionally adapted from the syllabus documents, the most encouraging aspect is the identification by the subject department of long-term goals. Indicative of capacity of the team for self-evaluation, the next stage will be to develop action plans that will establish strategies for achieving the agreed objectives.

The plan and associated schemes of work have been prepared electronically in a manner which facilitates updating and amendment. The schemes of work for the individual subjects are very well presented using a tabular format that details learning outcomes and assessment modes appropriate to each unit. There is also an overall agreed objective, to catalogue the resources available to support teaching in the subjects, that is being pursued in the current school year. While plans outline suggested teaching methodologies, little emphasis is placed on methodologies appropriate to mixed-ability settings. To build on the subject plan, emphasis should be placed on agreeing an appropriate range of teaching methodologies for mixed-ability settings and linking learning outcomes with subject specific resources and teaching aids.

Consistent with its strong review practices, the team has been considering how it might encourage students' interest in Economics as a senior cycle option. The potential to develop an economics module within TY, in order to expose students to economics, was discussed during the inspection and the teachers suggested such a module could be accommodated at the end of the year, within the mini-company enterprise module.

Individual planning is very good and integrated by linking the subject plan with schemes of work and teachers' lesson outcomes as recorded in their diaries. The work rate is very good among the team and teachers are on schedule or ahead of schedule in terms of completion of topics for the academic year. Materials were prepared for each lesson.

### **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The quality of teaching and learning was generally good and there were some examples of very good teaching observed.

Lesson preparation and pace was very good and the presentation of material by both teachers and students was very good with students mirroring their teachers' presentation, particularly with the bookkeeping and accounting elements.

Teachers' use of subject-specific terminology was very good in senior cycle Business but there is scope to improve the use of additional resources to develop applied business skills, especially for business theory. The team also needs to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of the use of transcribed notes, especially at junior cycle, as frequent use of transcription in both junior and senior cycle business lessons encourages passivity in students. There should be increased variety in the methods used including the use of graphic organisers and improved opportunities for students to develop their own revision aids.

Student behaviour was excellent in all the classes visited. Interactions between students and teachers were respectful and teachers affirmed students' efforts. This was achieved by effective classroom management techniques that emphasised lesson routines. This is a good approach to creating positive learning environments. Despite the positive lesson environments, there were not many examples of student-led questions during the lessons observed and students were mainly passive, but working hard to complete work assigned. This resulted from the prevalence of whole-class teaching in many of the lessons observed.

There was frequent use of teacher demonstration and guided practice followed by individual student work. Learning is predominantly individual and there is scope to encourage collaborative learning, for example using peer assessment at junior cycle, though some good examples of paired learning were observed. There was scope in some classrooms to adjust the seating layout to promote opportunities for shared learning opportunities. Where students were active in their learning, and lesson sequence included opportunities for group, pair and individual work that allowed for differentiation, student engagement with lesson content was maximised.

Teaching approaches were most varied at junior cycle. In all lessons, efforts were made to vary student questioning styles but there was a tendency to revert to global questions as lessons progressed. Best practice was observed in lessons where questions were differentiated and used as a means of affirming students in the mixed-ability class groups. Teachers must ensure that expectations of students and the degree of challenge in lesson content are constantly monitored and reviewed.

Calculator use by students of junior cycle Business Studies is very high and it is advised that the calculator usage at junior cycle needs to be consistent with the approach used in the mathematics department for simple calculations. Efforts had been made to develop many of the base business classrooms as resource rooms for the subjects. Very good use was made during the lessons observed of the transaction-posting posters and teacher-developed business game.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Teachers' record keeping is very good. Attendance is monitored and recorded in each lesson and the teachers' journals are used to record homework completed by students. It is also important to note that some of the business teachers keep individual records of daily lesson delivery and homework assigned. This practice is very good as it assists in smooth lesson delivery and maintains good classroom discipline and atmosphere.

Although homework completion is recorded by teachers, there is little formal evaluation of the outcomes attained as an indicator of student progress. The work is annotated by teachers but should in future include evaluative comment as part of the correction process. This would be consistent with the application of Assessment for Learning (AfL) principles. Homework is regularly assigned by the teachers and the techniques used include daily written assignments and question banks where students are given longer deadlines for completion. This is being used very effectively as a revision practice in Accounting. Work assigned at senior cycle Business includes both short and long answer questions which is beneficial in developing students higher order skills.

Formal assessment is very prevalent in the teaching of the subjects. There is a very strong emphasis on continuous assessment, with up to three assessments completed in some classes since the start of the school year. These assessment tests are mainly topic or chapter based. For first-year and second-year class groups, there are four formal assessment periods in the year. The overall school policy is that there are two formal reporting periods each year and reports on student progress are issued at the agreed times. There has been an improved focus on the use of common assessments within the department.

An analysis of student outcomes in the state examinations is undertaken at subject department level and the outcomes reported to the principal. This is good practice as it is led by the subject department and discussed at subject department meetings. In future years, the analysis could also include the higher and ordinary level uptake in the subjects.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Timetable provision for the subjects is very good especially in first year and senior cycle.
- The team has established agreed programmes and common assessments for the subjects.
- The format of subject plans is good and includes long-term objectives and an analysis of student outcomes in state examinations.
- Individual lesson planning and the pace of lessons are very good.
- In a number of lessons, very good mixed-ability teaching strategies were evident with strong emphasis on differentiation appropriate to the range of student abilities.
- Engagement of students with lesson content was strongest in lessons where active teaching methodologies were used.
- There is good practice with respect to formal, summative assessments.

- Teachers' use of subject-specific terminology is very good and lesson routines are well established.
- Good positive interactions were observed between students and teachers.
- Teachers' presentation of material is very good.

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

- Business teachers are advised to reduce the use of transcription and increase the variety of methodologies used for senior cycle theory lessons in order to accommodate the range of students' learning styles.
- The business team should take a more proactive role in informing students about senior cycle options in the subject.
- To build on the subject plan, emphasis should be placed on agreeing an appropriate range of teaching methodologies for mixed-ability settings and linking learning outcomes with subject-specific resources and teaching aids.
- ICT-based project work should be used at the start of second year that focuses on the revision of first-year learning outcomes as is currently set out in the subject plan.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.