

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT**

**Ardcoil na nDéise
Dungarvan, County Waterford
Roll number: 64900W**

Date of inspection: 27 January 2011



**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

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Ardscoil na nDéise. 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 one day 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 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Business education is well represented on the curriculum in Ardscoil na nDéise. Business Studies is provided in junior cycle, Business in Transition Year (TY) and at Leaving Certificate the three business options, Accounting, Business and Economics. The enterprise module of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is delivered by business teachers.

Business Studies is a core subject for first-year students and an optional subject thereafter. This good practice permits all first-year students to gain valuable financial skills. At the first year parent-teacher meeting teachers advise and discuss optional subject choices with parents.

While the school's TY programme is optional, almost all students progressing from junior cycle avail of this programme. TY students experience Enterprise for the duration of the year, and Economics and Business as two half-year modules. This good provision allows students new to the subject to consider it as an optional subject for Leaving Certificate.

Economics is a popular subject option for Leaving Certificate students and, while demand is not always sufficient to sustain a class group in both Accounting and Business each year, senior management has endeavoured to provide the subjects on alternate years. Discussions have taken place with another school in the locality to consider ways in which the subjects can be provided on the curriculum of both schools. This exemplifies the commitment that senior management has to provision of business subjects within the school's curriculum and to offering the widest subject choice possible to students.

Time allocated to business subjects at senior cycle is very good with six periods in fifth year and five periods in sixth year. The class periods are spread throughout the week and include a double period. Three class periods per week are provided for first-year Business Studies students. In second and third year respectively there are four class periods timetabled for Business Studies. The breadth of subject provision for first-year students allows students to make an informed choice in the selection of subjects for second year. Most business teachers teach a range of

subjects across both the junior and senior cycles. There is some specialisation at senior cycle which is consistent with the interests of the teachers.

All business teachers in the school are skilled specialists who are diligent in ensuring that their subject knowledge is current. They are members of the Business Studies Teachers Association of Ireland (BSTAI) and regularly attend subject association meetings, conferences and workshops. Business teachers have partaken in whole-school continuing professional development (CPD) courses organised by senior management as well as attending external CPD courses.

The school's campus is on two different sites separated by a public road and, as a result, most classrooms are student-based rather than teacher-based. There is no specialist or *de facto* business room in the school and items such as teaching aids, business resources and business-related posters and visuals cannot be used to their full potential. Nevertheless, there is scope to display business-related posters and student projects in classrooms and on notice boards within the school environs. While no annual budget exists for business subjects in the school, requests for resources are generally met with a positive response. It is recommended that an area in the school be identified where business resources and visuals can be stored and easily accessed by all the business subject teachers.

Currently there is no fixed information and communication technology (ICT) equipment, data projector or overhead projector in any of the classrooms where business education is provided. However, all classrooms are broadband-enabled and there is a portable data and overhead projector that business teachers can use. There is one well-equipped computer room which teachers and students can use when it is not timetabled for TY or LCVP students. All classrooms have Internet access. From a discussion with senior management it was noted that there are imminent plans to locate data projectors in all classrooms and provide teachers with laptops. It is advisable that business teachers now agree on a strategy to develop the use and integration of ICT into teaching and learning. The websites of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and BSTAI have resources that may assist in this process.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Business teachers in the school have a good working relationship. However, there is no overall business subjects co-ordinator in place. The three business teachers meet formally as discrete subject-based groups. A team approach to planning is desirable, as it permits the sharing of best practice. It is recommended that the business team meet as one group, that a co-ordinator be appointed from within the group and that this position rotate on a yearly basis. Senior management allocates time at the start of the academic year for subject planning meetings. The recorded outcomes of these meetings are filed with planning documentation. Good practice was noted where the business subjects department occasionally used a diagnostic window to evaluate its practices.

Each business subject has its own folder which contains a copy of the overall plan for the provision of business education, a copy of the curriculum plan for the particular business subject, copies of relevant whole school policies, the school calendar, copies of past examination papers and various subject-specific newspaper articles and resources. The overall plan for the provision of business education encompasses all the elements of good planning as outlined by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). Of particular merit in the overall plan is the guideline on how to identify students who may have special education needs and the effective strategies that a teacher may use to progress their learning. To enhance this good planning it is advisable to devise strategies relating to the development of proficiency in numeracy.

The curriculum plans for Accounting, Business, Business Studies and Economics list the scheme of work for each subject, the resources available to teachers and effective methodologies that could be employed by teachers in the classroom. The curriculum plan for Economics indicates the timeframe in which each topic is to be taught, the resources and assessment modes that could be used in teaching the topic and the learning outcomes that students are expected to attain at the conclusion of the topic. To build on this good planning practice the addition of teaching methodologies to this template is recommended, as is the adoption of this template for all business subjects.

The Business module in TY gives a business perspective to students new to business while building and developing business expertise in students who studied Business Studies. While the Economics module in TY aims to focus the student on what is live and dynamic in our economy and on current issues such as the demise of the “Celtic tiger” and budgetary challenges, it also includes some of the basic concepts in macro and micro economics. The year-long Enterprise module develops an entrepreneurial culture in students as they compete in mini-company competitions. All modules conform to the ethos of the TY programme.

In all lessons observed, the relevant subject curriculum year plan was implemented on an individual class basis and teachers maintained good records of their progression through the agreed schedule of topics. Teachers’ individual planning and lesson preparation was good.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

During the course of the inspection five lessons were observed, covering senior cycle Accounting, Business and Economics and junior cycle second and third year Business Studies. In addition the inspector had an informal conversation with TY students who were not timetabled on the day of the evaluation, and also with first-year students on their experience of business education in the school. As evidenced in conversations with students they clearly appreciated the provision of business education in the school. The overall standard of teaching and learning in business subjects was good. However the range of teaching methodologies and resources used by teachers needs to be expanded. Lessons observed were well structured and prepared, and followed a logical sequence of activities. In most lessons the learning outcomes were outlined.

In the lessons observed the methodologies used to support learning included teacher talk, discussions and instructions, student input, pair work, questioning, note-taking, and the use of ICT and graphic organisers. In most lessons observed there was a predominance of traditional teaching methodologies. In planning documentation reference was made to effective teaching methodologies that included active and co-operative learning strategies suitable for the teaching of business subjects. Teachers should endeavour to use these and additional methodologies such as group work in order to engage the varied learning styles of students.

In lessons with a book-keeping focus the teaching methodologies used were good. Teachers used a sequential approach to ensure that students understood each step before moving on to new learning. The teachers’ presentation of material was good and this was mirrored in students’ presentation of work in account books. Teachers visually checked on students’ progress, tendered individual support and gave advice in a calm and affirming manner.

Teachers and students used appropriate business language and terminology in lessons observed. Teachers used good examples of business people and situations and this helped to develop

business knowledge, understanding and applied business skills. At senior cycle the use of current and topical economic and business issues was particularly effective.

The teaching resources used included a poster, handouts and, in one lesson, a portable OHP to display worked solutions to questions. While teachers are not classroom-based, there is scope for increased use of audio and visual aids in the teaching of business subjects. In one lesson students were brought to the computer room where they completed an interactive exercise. They clearly enjoyed this and it was a good learning experience. However, there are only a few time slots when the computer room is available. The planned installation of ICT equipment will be timely as the inclusion of ICT use as a methodology and resource in the teaching and learning of business subjects is vital.

In all lessons questioning was used to check students' understanding. This was particularly effective where named students were asked and a mixture of higher and lower-order questions was used to differentiate learning. Good practice was observed in a lesson where students had to employ higher-order thinking to speculate and hypothesise on liquidity trends in a business.

In one lesson, students were asked to the board to display their knowledge and interpretation of data by drawing a diagram. This was a particularly effective way of engaging students in their own learning. In the same lesson pairs of students completed a good exercise using a graphic organiser. It is advisable that business teachers share successful teaching methodologies and formalise best practice in teaching to ensure that students in each year receive a similar learning experience.

In all lessons observed classroom management was good. There was good rapport and positive interactions between teachers and students, and students' efforts were positively affirmed. Seating arrangements in classrooms facilitated group work and ease of movement for the teacher to give individual support and guidance to students.

ASSESSMENT

Students are formally assessed at Christmas and the end of the academic year, and informally on the completion of each curriculum topic. Common formal assessments are administered to students in junior cycle. Samples of assessment tests were made available and they contain a good spread of short and long questions. Assessment in TY is measured by the subject teacher and includes an evaluation of projects completed during the year, students' participation in mini company and observation of attitudes. Teachers maintain records of all assessment outcomes and these along with student academic progress in business subjects are communicated to parents by written reports and at parent teacher meetings.

Business subject teachers have adopted the school's homework policy. The recommended time that a student should devote to homework each evening is noted in business subject planning documentation. In all lessons observed homework was assigned to students and homework from previous lessons corrected. However the practice of assigning regular homework was not consistent throughout the subject department. A sample of student copybooks and homework journals was viewed. In many instances homework was only recorded once or twice a week and this matched work completed in copybooks. While tick-marking was noted in copybooks, there were few evaluative comments designed to provide developmental feedback to students on their work. In this context, it is recommended that the subject department review its homework policy so that all students receive regular well-monitored homework within each year group. It is advisable to include Assessment for Learning (AfL) techniques for use in the business subjects

department. The website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (www.ncca.ie) provides information on AfL that may be helpful to the department.

Business students are encouraged to aim for high academic standards and to take business subjects at the highest possible level in the certificate examinations. As a result uptake at higher level is very good. The outcomes in certificate examinations are good. They are analysed by business teachers and compared to national norms.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Business education is positively supported through the provision of all available business subjects and good timetable provision in senior cycle.
- Long, medium and short-term subject planning is good and well organised.
- Teaching and learning was particularly good where classroom learning was linked to the real business environment and where students were active participants in their own learning.
- In certificate examinations higher level uptake is good and outcomes are good.
- Classroom management and atmosphere was good and students were positively affirmed in all interactions.
- Assessment design is good and a common paper is administered to students in junior cycle.

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

- Teaching methodologies should be incorporated into the Economics curriculum planning template, which should then be followed for planning in all business-related subjects.
- A storage area should be provided in the school where business resources and visuals can be easily accessed by all business subject teachers.
- Business subject teachers should meet as one team and appoint a co-ordinator from within the group.
- The business department should undertake a review of the homework policy to ensure that all business students receive regular well-monitored homework and to incorporate the use of Assessment for Learning (AfL) techniques.

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

Published October 2011

Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

Page 4 states: “the range of teaching methodologies and resources used by teachers needs to be expanded.” WE feel that is not always possible to use a wide range of methodologies and resources within one class period, and only five classes were observed in total. A wide range of teaching methodologies are used by our teachers which include group work, pair work, role play etc., as outlined in the curriculum plan and as appropriate to the topic in hand.

Page 5 states: “The practice of assigning regular work was not consistent throughout the subject department. A sample of student copybooks and homework journals was viewed. In many instances homework was only recorded once or twice a week and this matched work completed in copybooks.” On page 7, under heading “Inspection activities undertaken” reference is made to “Examination of random sample of students journals, copies and folders.”

Approximately four copies were viewed in each class, and teachers felt that copies viewed were not always representative of the class in general. Some students do not always bring their journals in with them to class, and do not always write down in their journals the homework that was given. Moreover, Junior classes meet their Business teachers only three times per week. We are confident that homework is regularly given, corrected and monitored. Teachers pointed out that the inspector did not look at homework that students had done in their exam papers, as outlined in the homework policy. The teachers give regular tests and use worksheets which offer feedback to students. Our Business teachers work extremely hard and are very diligent and consistent in their approach to their work.

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

A storage area has been provided where business resources and visuals can be accessed by Business subject teachers.

Business subject teachers will meet as one team and appoint a co-ordinator for the coming school year.

Data projectors have been installed in all classrooms to facilitate the use of I.T. resources. Each teacher now has the use of a laptop.