An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT

Sacred Heart Secondary School,
Tullamore,
Co. Offaly
Roll number: 65620V

Date of inspection: 30 April 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN BUSINESS SUBJECTS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Sacred Heart Secondary School, Tullamore. 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. 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Business subjects have a very strong profile in the curriculum provision in Sacred Heart Secondary School. Business Studies is a core subject for all junior cycle students. School management’s decision to include the subject within core provision followed several years where almost all students opted for the subject when it was part of the optional junior cycle provision. In addition to junior cycle Business Studies, all three senior cycle options are available: Accounting, Business and Economics. Enterprise studies form a core element of the Transition Year (TY) programme within the school. In future curriculum reviews, consideration should be given to including Office Administration and Customer Care as a vocational specialism within the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), as all students will have taken Business Studies at junior cycle.

Timetabling provision is good across senior cycle with one double and three single periods in each year. At junior cycle, the inclusion of the subject within core provision meant a reduction in the overall time allocated to the subject. It is recommended that the time allocated to the subject at junior cycle is reviewed. Either the number of periods in second year is increased or second-year and third-year allocation is restructured to include at least one double period to facilitate the completion of the practical aspects of the syllabus. An additional option to be considered for improving the time allocation for the subject is to assign a number of business teachers to teach the first-year information and communication technology (ICT) modules. The existing ICT modular programme could be further weighted in favour of outcomes related to the Business Studies syllabus. This approach would also encourage students in their use of ICT as a learning tool.

Senior cycle option bands are generated following a survey of student choices. The provision of all three business options is very good and ensures continuity of provision from junior cycle. Arrangements for the provision of information on optional subjects are directed primarily by the guidance counsellor. The inspector’s interactions with the current Leaving Certificate students...
indicated that awareness of the support provided by resources, including Qualifax, to aid in selecting third-level options was highest among those who were taking the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). The interactions also indicated that a number of students were not clear on the relationship between optional subject choice and eligibility for the (LCVP). It is recommended that the improved access to guidance introduced for the current fifth-year groups, regardless of the senior cycle programme followed, is maintained and that all senior cycle students who are LCVP compliant continue to be made aware of their eligibility to participate in the programme. Additional support could be provided by formalising the role of the subject department in the process of senior cycle subject selection.

There are good systems and procedures are in place for identifying and providing support for students with additional educational needs. Of particular merit is that students from across the ability range are accommodated in the business classes and that the classes are of mixed ability.

The use of ICT in teaching the subjects is actively promoted. This is a particular strength among the team and the sharing of resources and methodologies in respect of this is very evident. The subject department actively accesses and shares ICT supports from the science department. If the board of management are to allocate additional ICT teaching resources within the school, then the business department is well placed to make very good use of them.

Appropriately designated specialist rooms are available and every effort is made to timetable business classes to these rooms. There are some good examples of the classrooms being used as resource rooms for the subjects, and good provision is made at subject level for the management of teaching resources, including updates and maintenance. The deployment of teachers is in line with their qualifications, skills, knowledge and interests and facilitates rotation of all teachers across all subject levels and all programmes.

Teachers are encouraged and facilitated to attend continuing professional development (CPD) activities and to share good practice within the subject department. One example of this was the use of support materials from the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) within lessons. A well-structured mentoring programme is in place for new subject teachers and is managed by a member of the department.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

A subject department is established and good subject planning systems operate within the department. A subject co-ordinator is in place and the position rotates among the team. Subject co-ordination is working effectively and there is very good practice in relation to sharing resources and experience.

On occasion the department meetings can sometimes sub-divide by subject at senior cycle. This is not necessary and the team should meet collectively in order to pool the range of experience and views. This would also provide an element of informal CPD especially when a teacher may not, within that current school, year be involved in the teaching of the subject. It was evident from the documentation that meetings are held regularly and the outcomes recorded. The capacity of the team to engage with planning and review is best demonstrated by the level of forward planning undertaken in preparation for the move from optional to core provision at junior cycle.

Comprehensive subject planning documentation has been collated and consists of general background documentation and the agreed subject plans. There is scope to improve the
presentation of the yearly schemes of work by consolidating the existing information into more
defined schemes where the learning outcomes for each area are agreed and the resources and
assessment modes and methodologies appropriate to each area presented in an easily accessible
tabular format.

The junior cycle plan is of particular merit in that the balance in treatment of the three business
disciplines within the plan is reflected in the numbers taking each of the subjects at senior cycle
and the school is particularly commended for the high numbers of students taking Accounting and
Economics to Leaving Certificate level.

During the inspection, there was very clear evidence of department planning, both formal and
informal. Individual lesson planning was very good and preparation of materials, handouts,
presentations and differentiated materials for class was very good. The sharing of good practice
by the more senior teachers among the team is of benefit to new teachers and consistent with the
objectives of the mentoring programme outlined in the subject plan. Of particular merit is the
level to which materials and resources are shared among the team and the development of the
shared manual and electronic resource folders.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning was generally very good. Each lesson had clear aims and
learning outcomes and these were communicated to students at the outset. In some lessons this
was done explicitly and in other implicitly in terms of general classroom practice and
management. Lesson content and pace were appropriate to the class group, subject matter and
time available. Teachers ensured that there was good continuity with prior learning and that
lessons were well structured and characterised by smooth transitions from one stage to the next.

The lessons observed were consistent with the planned programmes of work and this was evident
in particular in the revision lessons with examination year groups. The teachers generally
demonstrated a good level of competence and skill in the subject areas. In using examples that
were current and related to the students own personal experience, it was evident that teachers kept
up to date with developments in the local and wider business environment. This was particularly
evident in the economics lessons observed.

Emphasis was also placed on the development of students’ business literacy and numeracy skills
in addition to the presentation of work. The team have a consistent approach to the presentation of
accounting-related and bookkeeping-related outcomes, an approach which is consistent with best
practice in this area and influenced by the experience of the accounting teachers within the team.

Though the number of students with additional educational needs is not high, the teachers’
practice in using differentiated teaching methods to meet the needs of students is very good. In
one third-year revision lesson, this was very sensitively done and the activity planned in terms of
learning outcomes to be achieved.

A relatively consistent approach was evident among the team in relation to the range of teaching
methodologies used. Lesson content was summarised and, where relevant, students informed of
the subject matter of forthcoming lessons. A range of questioning strategies was used and
particular attention paid to the use of subject-specific terminology by both students and teachers.
The TY programme is a well integrated programme and has established links with the local business community. In terms of teaching and learning, very good reflective practice is encouraged in students when undertaking the full range of activities. Also, the use of ICT as a learning tool to develop students’ research and presentation skills is most evident in TY. Where the skills transfer from TY to mainstream teaching is good, it enriches the range of learning experiences for students of business subjects in the school.

Students were given opportunities to apply their knowledge and understanding to the current business environment. This is more apparent at senior cycle, especially TY, than at junior cycle. Although there was evidence of the use of resources to enhance learning, there is scope to improve student initiative, activity and creativity through independent-learning opportunities in business education at the junior cycle. There is also scope to increase the individual students’ engagement with ICT as a learning tool that will build on the significant strength existing in the teaching team in relation to the use of ICT as a teaching tool.

Students’ participation in classroom activities was closely monitored by the teachers and classroom management was mostly effective, with discipline sensitively maintained. Students responded positively to clear class rules and teacher instructions. Pastoral systems are very strong and students’ relationship with their teachers is a key strength in the teaching of the subjects.

Learning activities including oral, aural, practical and project work were well managed. The room and seating arrangements created safe, orderly and participative learning environments. There were some very good examples of pair work and peer assessment used which helped generate and maintain enthusiasm for the subjects. In many lessons, particularly when active teaching methodologies were prevalent, students’ enthusiasm and enjoyment of the subjects was evident.

Students were for the most part active in their own learning, in their questioning and in their responses to questions, though this varied between classes and levels within the school. Students’ written, oral and practical work indicated good progress, appropriate to their abilities, in relation to planned learning outcomes. The students observed demonstrated clear knowledge and understanding of topics under study, and could apply their learning in a range of business contexts.

**ASSESSMENT**

An agreed subject department homework and assessment policy is implemented. Homework is assigned appropriately, regularly monitored, and marked with an evaluative comment. Where appropriate, homework assignments are differentiated to reflect students’ abilities.

Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning in the department. The assessment modes used reflect the assessment objectives of the syllabuses and programmes. There are individual variances in the modes used but this is acceptable in light of the continuity in allocation of teachers to class groups. In all instances, a range of modes was used without dependency on one particular approach, and this is good practice. However, there is scope to share experience and expertise and agree a departmental approach to assessment modes appropriate to particular learning outcomes.

In many lessons students were encouraged to engage in self-assessment and peer-assessment as appropriate. Excellent practice was evident in a number of lessons in using these assessment...
modes. In addition, formative assessment techniques were used effectively by two teachers to encourage students to evaluate and improve their own work.

End-of-topic tests are set, where appropriate. An example of good record keeping was the use of memorandum books for all in-class assessments thereby providing evidence of progression for both parents and students. This also provided a record of corrections and evaluative comment on assessments. Common tests are administered where possible and assessments differentiated to reflect students’ abilities. This was particularly evident in examination year groups.

In using assessment outcomes to gauge students’ progress and to identify learning needs, teaching methods, pace and content are modified, based on the outcomes of assessments. An appropriate system is in place for the collation and storage of students’ work, including examination materials, and the base rooms are used very well for this. Students and parents are provided with information on performance and progress through regular reports and annual parent-teacher meetings. New teachers are supported in preparing for parent-teacher meetings through the mentoring programme.

Results achieved in the state examinations are analysed at management level and that analysis is made available to the subject department. The department should take the lead in analysing the results including comparisons with the national norms for the subjects in order to note positive outcomes.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Business Studies is a core subject for all junior cycle students.
- Participation rates in business subjects at senior cycle are very high and the provision of all three business options is commended.
- The use of ICT is a particular strength in the teaching of the subjects.
- The teachers are committed at an individual level to engage with updating subject knowledge and skills and with collaborative team work.
- Very good planning systems and procedures are in place within the department.
- Pastoral systems are very strong and students’ relationship with their teachers is a key strength in the teaching of the subjects.
- Where the skills transfer from TY to mainstream teaching is good, it enriches the range of learning experiences for students of business subjects in the school.
- Learning activities including oral, aural, practical and project work were well managed.
- Excellent practice was evident in a number of lessons where students were encouraged to engage in self-assessment and peer-assessment as appropriate.

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

- It is recommended that the time allocated to the subject at junior cycle is reviewed. Either the number of periods in second year is increased or second and third-year allocation is restructured to include at least one double period to facilitate the completion of the practical aspects of the syllabus.
- The business department should be prioritised in the event of additional ICT resources being made available by the board of management, as the ICT skill base is high among the business teachers and good systems exist for sharing expertise.
• There is scope to increase students’ engagement with ICT as a learning tool that will build on the significant strength existing in the teaching team in relation to the use of ICT as a teaching tool.

• The subject department should take the lead in analysing the results achieved in the state examinations and comparing them with the national norms for the subjects.

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

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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

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

The evaluation of the teaching and learning in Business Subjects has been fair. The intrinsic thrust of the report is accurate and consistent with the schools practices. The Management has noted the recommendations as an extra period of tuition at Junior Level and welcomes the advice of including office admin and customer care as a vocational specialism in LCA. The Management welcome the reports support of the Board of Managements efforts for the facilitation to attend continuous professional development and the provision of ICT to the Business Department to date. The teachers’ practice in mixed ability setting is acknowledged and highlighted as being very good. Modes of Assessment being used were well acknowledged within the 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.

- Planned that the team will meet collectively in order to pool the range of experience and views as recommended in the report.
- The time allocated to the subject has been reviewed. There will now be four periods in 2nd year from September 2011/12.
- Monies from the ICT grant to schools has been spent on additional ICT resources.
- The subject department has been encouraged to analyse results achieved in the State Exams for the last number of years. This will continue to be the practice.