Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT

Saint Mary’s College
Arklow, County Wicklow
Roll number: 61780A

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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, Arklow. 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 this subject 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. 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

In St. Mary’s College, students can avail of business education through the provision of Business Studies at junior cycle; business modules in the optional Transition Year programme (TY); and Accounting and Business at Leaving Certificate. Students can also avail of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) in which the Enterprise module is taught by business teachers.

In November, prospective first-year students attend an open day and this is followed by an evening meeting for parents. At this meeting an information pack on all available subjects at junior cycle is provided to parents and their daughters. Students can choose three of the following subjects: Business Studies, French, German, Home Economics and Science. Subject option bands are generated from the subject preferences as identified by students. While school management is conscious of the need to assist first-year students in making informed subject choices, consideration should be given to the provision of a short taster programme as this would allow students to experience each optional subject before subject choice decisions are made. It is recommended that an analysis and review of subject choice for incoming first years be conducted by senior management. As part of this review the provision of a taster programme and/or a subject fair for incoming first years should be discussed.

Business is an optional module on the TY curriculum thus giving an opportunity to students who did not take Business Studies to experience the subject. Both Accounting and Business are offered to students at Leaving Certificate. Most students who take Business Studies at junior cycle continue with one or both of the subjects in Leaving Certificate, a very positive finding.

The allocation of teaching periods to the subjects at junior and senior cycle is good. The mix of double and single periods is spread throughout the week, providing continuity between lessons and an opportunity for homework to be assigned regularly. All teachers in the business department teach Business Studies at junior cycle and a very good system is in place to ensure that teachers rotate between subjects at senior cycle. Teachers remain with their class group for the duration of the cycle.
The business subjects department receives an annual budget from senior management which is used to purchase relevant resources. There is a dedicated room in the school for the storage of business and LCVP resources. The cataloguing of these resources for inclusion in the subject plan would enhance this good facility. There are three main business specialist classrooms, each with fixed data projectors and access to television (TV), multimedia equipment and overhead projectors. The school has a computer room which can be used by business teachers and students when it is available. Senior management is commended for its ongoing commitment to the provision of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the school.

All teachers in the business department are skilled subject specialists with good up-to-date knowledge of their subjects and relevant business-topical issues. Senior management facilitates attendance at in-service courses. Teachers have attended subject-related in-service provided by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS). Senior management has also provided whole-school in-service on assessment for learning, ICT in the classroom and understanding human behaviour. It was evident throughout the course of the evaluation that teachers successfully incorporated strategies from these in-service courses in their teaching practices.

Business subjects are taught in mixed-ability settings. Teachers were observed to differentiate their teaching in order to address all ability levels in the classroom. Business teachers liaise with the learning-support co-ordinator to devise the best learning strategies for students with special educational needs in their classroom.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The business subjects department has a rotating co-ordinator position. The subject department is assigned formal time to meet twice a year. Minutes of meetings indicate that the business subjects department continually evaluates and seeks to improve its practices.

A long-term plan is in place for all business subjects taught in the school. The plan has the required elements for good planning and includes a curriculum plan for each year group, a list of suitable teaching methodologies, strategies for differentiated learning, the range and variety of resources and a homework policy for business subjects. The methodologies listed for use in second and third year were more traditional. However, it was evident in observation of lessons that a range of additional active methodologies is also used, and this good practice should be noted in the plan.

The curriculum plans for each business subject set out the sequence in which topics are taught along with the type of class work and homework that could be employed. It is recommended that the learning outcomes, available resources and methodologies for each topic be also noted. This will facilitate a common approach to the teaching and assessment of business subjects.

The TY business module gives a business perspective to students new to business while building and developing business expertise in students who studied Business Studies at junior cycle. Topics in the TY module include: mini-company, entrepreneurship, marketing, the world of work and consumer education. The aims and objectives of the module as outlined in the plan are good.

Individual planning and lesson preparation by teachers was good. During the course of the day teachers used a variety of resources such as textbooks, handouts, question sheets, ICT generated resources, excerpts of DVDs and visual aids to progress learning. The school is proactive in supporting students with additional educational needs. Included in planning documentation is a business concept and keyword template which teachers may use with
their students. To develop the potential of this good resource it is advisable to include basic business calculations on the template and to share it with the learning-support and resource teachers for use in extra tuition.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In lessons observed, teachers’ planning, preparation and pacing were of a high standard. Each lesson observed had a coherent structure with aims and objectives outlined at the start of the lesson. Homework assigned from previous lessons was corrected. All lessons observed incorporated prior learning experiences and the homework assigned served to reinforce the learning outcomes of the lesson. Overall the standard of teaching and learning was good.

During the course of the inspection six lessons were observed, covering senior cycle Business and Accounting, TY Business and a lesson from each year of junior cycle Business Studies. In lessons observed, traditional and active methodologies were used successfully in teaching and learning. They included pair work, group work, teacher and student-led discussion, use of ICT and video presentations. In the lessons that focused on book-keeping there was good use and explanation of book-keeping terminology. A good sequential approach was adopted by all teachers. Teachers modelled good practice in question layout and reminded students of the need for clear labelling and neatness in their work.

In a TY lesson visited, it was evident that the programme is delivered in a manner that upholds its ideals. In the lesson students were active, engaged and co-operative in their learning. The use of ‘post-it’ notes in brainstorming for mini-company ideas was a particularly effective and enjoyable learning experience for students. The use of this and similar classroom activities is applauded.

There was effective use of ICT in several lessons observed. A data projector was used to display homework solutions and new lesson material in the form of well constructed graphic and linguistic presentations. In a lesson where a video clip played real life scenarios it allowed the topic to become real in the minds of the students. The inclusion of ICT as a methodology for teaching and learning in the manner displayed during the inspection is commended.

In most lessons good questioning techniques were used to differentiate learning. A mix of global and targeted questioning was used to initiate and maintain class discussion and to check on students’ understanding and progression in subject matter. As a means of increasing students’ understanding, motivation and attainment higher-order questioning should be used more frequently and targeted at students of higher ability.

It was evident from student interactions with teachers and the inspector that students had good business knowledge and understanding and were competent in their use of business terminology. Students were affirmed when they brought to the classroom items they had read in newspapers and heard on television, and resources such as business documents that supported the teaching and learning of the lesson.

In lessons observed classroom management was good. There was good rapport and positive interactions between teachers and students with positive affirmation of students’ efforts. Seating arrangements in classrooms facilitated group work and ease of movement for the teacher to give individual support and guidance to students. The dedicated business classrooms displayed some commercial and student-generated posters that were attractive and had the potential to be used as teaching and learning aids. This development of this print-rich environment could be further enhanced with displays of student project work.
ASSESSMENT

The school has devised assessment and homework policies and these are followed by the business subjects department. Formal house examinations are administered twice a year and informal tests are normally conducted after the completion of a topic. Samples of tests were made available to the inspector; they contained a good spread of short and long questions which facilitates the development of higher-order skills. Students in junior cycle are given common formal tests. Teachers maintain records of students’ attainment outcomes and progress and these are communicated via a written twice-yearly report to parents and at the annual parent-teacher meeting.

Students in TY are assessed as part of the formal process in the school. In addition a range of assessments such as teacher observations of student participation in class and in groups, written assignments, and compilations of reports, project work and presentations are evaluated.

In all observed lessons good quality homework was assigned to students and in most lessons it was noted on the board. In lessons that required a display of a written solution, teachers modelled good practice in neatness and labelling of answers. The use of overhead and data projectors facilitated this good practice. The vast majority of students’ account books, folders and journals were neat and well maintained. Students and teachers are commended for the high standards maintained in this important aspect of school work. In a sample of homework copybooks there were some evaluative comments made on students’ work. The use of evaluative comment is beneficial to students and it is advisable that this practice be expanded within the business subjects department.

Students are encouraged to achieve to their highest potential and to take business subjects at higher level in certificate examinations. Outcomes are good in certificate examinations. A review of these outcomes is conducted by the principal and is communicated to the teachers in the business department. It is advisable that this practice be adopted by the business subjects department as it will assist in self-evaluation.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is a good uptake of business subjects in Leaving Certificate.
- There is a tangible ongoing commitment to the provision and use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the school and by business teachers.
- The business subjects department is organised with regard to planning practice and storage of resources. All business teachers have up-to-date knowledge, are willing to share expertise, and reflect on their work.
- Lessons were well planned with good pace and learning activities.
- Good teaching and learning was observed in lessons.

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

- Senior management should conduct an analysis and review of subject choice for incoming first years, with a view to initiating a taster programme or subject fair.
• In the curriculum plan for each subject, the range of methodologies, the available resources and the learning outcomes for each topic should also be noted.

Post-evaluation meetings were 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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