

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT**

**Meán Scoil Mhuire,
Convent Road, Longford
Co. Longford
Roll number: 63760E**

Date of inspection: 3 & 4 November 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

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Meán Scoil Mhuire, Longford. 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

Curricular provision for business subjects in Meán Scoil Mhuire includes Business Studies at junior cycle and two options, Accounting and Business, at senior cycle. A business module is also included within the Transition Year (TY) programme. The time allocated to the subjects at junior and senior cycles meets the guidelines and provision for the business module within TY is good.

Business Studies is a core subject at junior cycle and of particular merit is that access to the subject is available to all students regardless of ability. At junior cycle, classes are organised on a mixed-ability basis and this is good practice. Senior cycle Accounting classes are streamed and the business department is advised to review the effectiveness of this approach and its appropriateness to maximising the attainment of all students taking the subject, especially at ordinary level.

Business is an important element of the TY programme and includes both an enterprise activity and a business element. Uptake of business subjects at senior cycle is relatively strong, especially in relation to Accounting. This reflects the tradition of the subject within the school and was reflected in the contributions of first-year students during the inspection when questioned about their expectations of the subjects. In more recent years the number of students opting for senior cycle Business has declined and the business department is advised to monitor uptake of the range of business subjects as part of the subject planning process.

As the subject is core for all students at junior cycle, ideally teachers should retain class groups through the cycle. This is not always the case as there can be changes in teachers allocated to groups between first and second year. Every effort should be made to allocate teachers to classes for the duration of junior cycle.

All teachers of the subjects are business graduates and there is a range of subject-specific skills among the team. However, there is a need for capacity building among the team and, therefore,

increased rotation of teachers to teaching the subjects at senior cycle is important. Engagement with continuing professional development (CPD) varies among the team members and, to date, has focused on whole-school CPD events and in-service support provided by support services funded by the Department of Education and Skills. Some members of the team have actively engaged with personal professional development, specifically in the use of information and communication technology (ICT). Where relevant, teachers are encouraged to engage with subject-specific personal CPD to ensure that they are aware of changes in the wider business environment and current business trends relevant to the teaching of the subjects.

The school's management is commended for the prioritisation of ICT access for staff, the provision of laptops to staff and widespread availability of data projectors in classrooms. The availability of wireless broadband in classrooms also provides an opportunity for business that is not being fully exploited by all the team as a teaching and learning tool. The system is used administratively to monitor student attendance. Further consideration should be given by management to using this technology to replace the frequent use of the school's intercom system during lesson time. Staff could be sent a daily administrative e-mail detailing school notices to be read out to students at a designated time each day.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A subject department is in place with the role of co-ordinator undertaken on a voluntary basis. Not all teachers in the department have availed of the opportunity to undertake this role. Department meetings are held biannually and minutes were available for meetings held at the start of the school year only. It is advised that the outcomes of all formal meetings of the subject department are recorded and that the tenure for the position of co-ordinator is agreed for a minimum two-year period. It is also advised that the role of co-ordinator rotates among all members of the business department, which will be beneficial for the team's continuing professional development.

Subject planning is at an early stage of development. Some of the individual subject plans are more advanced than others. In the case of Accounting, the plan provided during the inspection was not a working document but rather a summary report on current practice. Overall, the plans are too reliant on the syllabus documents for aims and objectives. Neither have they been linked to the school's mission statement nor do they reflect an overarching view of the role of the subjects within the school curriculum.

In developing the overall subject plan, priority should be given towards ensuring that it is a working document for the delivery of the subjects in the classrooms. Currently, most schemes of work list the overall topics to be completed, generally the chapter titles from the textbooks, and broad timeframes for their delivery within the school year. The plans should link curriculum topics with learning outcomes, appropriate methodologies and resources. Additionally, the plans should propose assessment strategies appropriate to the learning outcomes.

The development of the subject plan along the lines outlined would provide the department with an opportunity to agree effective strategies for the delivery of the practical and theoretical aspects of the syllabuses. It would also provide a useful resource for induction and mentoring of new teachers to the department.

It is commendable that classes are organised on a mixed-ability basis at junior cycle. In supporting students learning, the subject plan should identify appropriate teaching methodologies

for mixed-ability classroom settings. In addition, the plan should include teaching strategies and interventions suitable for students with additional learning needs. In planning for the provision for students with additional learning needs, support should be sought from the school's learning support co-ordinator.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning observed was good and in some instances very good. Classroom management techniques were very good with established class routines that resulted in positive student behaviour. This was also supported by teachers having good expectations about students' abilities.

Teachers' presentation of material, both oral and visual, was consistently strong and of a very high standard which was mirrored in the students' presentation of their work. The use by teachers of subject-specific terminology was good and there were good examples of reinforcement of subject principles, for example rules for posting transactions, throughout lessons.

Most teachers worked hard to ensure that lessons had a mix of activities to keep students' attention and good approaches were evident in junior cycle lessons that reflected students' learning styles and their experience at primary level. This is a very good approach in aiding students' transition to the post-primary setting.

Some good practice in relation to sharing, reviewing and summarising lesson outcomes were observed during the inspection and it is recommended that this approach extends across all business lessons. In a number of lessons, students were very passive and this was attributable to the teacher-centred approach in lesson delivery. Where whole-class teaching dominated, there is a need to improve the focus on small-group, pair and co-operative learning opportunities. There is also scope to improve the teacher questioning styles used, particularly in mixed-ability settings, and adopt common strategies for differentiation, including seating arrangements. In some lessons, students were encouraged to engage in pair work. However, there is need to establish groups or pairs based on the students' needs and abilities, to maximise the impact of the activity. This can be easily achieved as classrooms were well set out, despite limitations on space.

In senior cycle Business, very good use was made of ICT to introduce the lesson outcomes by PowerPoint and show a short audio-visual clip relating to the lesson theme of marketing. This was followed by a question and answer session that allowed students to engage with the material and link it to previous knowledge. This approach worked well towards encouraging students to develop their applied business skills. Keywords were also emphasised in the lesson which aids the learning of students for whom English is an additional language and this is a good approach.

Overall, despite some good practice, insufficient use was made of the available ICT resources in the teaching of the subjects. The level of access to ICT resources provides great scope for its use as an active teaching and learning methodology, including developing students' subject knowledge and the management of corrections within lessons.

Commendably, junior cycle students are involved in co-curricular activities, including the recent visit of first-year students to a local bank. It is recommended that the benefits accruing from this approach be strengthened by a follow-up activity, for example a project or report that would enable students to demonstrate their learning.

Students are provided with notes, as revision aids, in many of the business lessons. It is recommended that the use of notes, especially text-based transcribed notes, should not be a major feature in the teaching of the subjects, especially at junior cycle. Best practice was evident where the use of transcribed notes was minimised and the material presented in mixed format, including graphic organisers, PowerPoint summaries and student-developed notes.

ASSESSMENT

There is a high degree of consistency among the team in recording assessment outcomes and student attendance. Teachers use e-portal for administration and report to parents on students' progress, twice yearly. Despite the absence of a whole-school assessment policy, the approach of business teachers to formal assessment is relatively uniform, especially with respect to end-of-topic assessments. In addition, good practice exists among the team with respect to the design of formal assessment instruments and the use of structured marking schemes. There is also very good use by students of peer and self assessment with accounting and bookkeeping exercises.

Homework is regularly assigned by teachers, and was corrected as a whole-class or peer activity in many of the lessons observed. The subject plan states that homework completed will be regularly reviewed by teachers but practice in respect of this is not consistent among the team. All teachers are advised to regularly monitor work completed by students, as occasional literacy and numeracy issues, including misspellings and inconsistency in calculator use during lessons, was observed in the inspector's review of students' work. This could be easily addressed by having a consistent department approach to literacy and numeracy within the teaching of the subjects.

Currently, no formal analysis of outcomes in the state examinations is completed by the department. There is a need for formal analysis of the outcomes in order to inform the development of the subjects in the school as the inspector's review indicated that, though grades attained are relatively consistent with the national norms, there have been some changes in the pattern of level at which students take the subjects. The analysis should include the number of students sitting each subject at senior cycle and the level and grade attainment at both Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate, with particular reference to follow through from junior to senior cycle.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Whole-school support for the subjects and the provision of ICT resources is good.
- Time allocation for the subjects is good at junior and senior cycle.
- Uptake of business subjects at senior cycle is relatively strong.
- Classroom management strategies are consistently good within the teaching team.
- The quality of teaching and learning is good.
- Students were well behaved.
- There is a high degree of consistency in assessment practice among the team members.
- Good practice exists in the team with respect to the design of formal assessment instruments and the use of structured marking schemes.

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

- The development of the subject plan should be progressed as a priority by the subject department to ensure that it is a working document for the delivery of the subjects in the classrooms.
- Greater use should be made of the available ICT resources in the teaching of the subjects, both for developing students' subject knowledge and the management of corrections within lessons.
- A formal analysis of examination outcomes should be undertaken by the subject department. This should include the number of students sitting each subject at senior cycle and the level and grade attainment at both Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate, with particular reference to follow through from junior to senior cycle.

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.