SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Galway Community College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in [Name of Subject] 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, and examined students’ work. 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

Galway Community College is a co-educational community college under the trusteeship of the City of Galway Vocational Education Committee. The student population includes students from a wide range of abilities, socio-economic groups and cultural backgrounds. The school strives to cater for the wide range of abilities and benefits from additional resources and supports by its participation in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme.

Geography forms part of the compulsory curriculum in first year and is assigned two teaching periods per week. In second year students choose to study either Geography or History and the subject is allocated three class periods per week for the remainder of the junior cycle. Geography is also present in the school’s optional Transition Year (TY) programme. At senior cycle Geography is offered within an open choice structure from which subsequent option bands are created to accommodate maximum student choice. This student-centred approach is good practice. Students and their parents are well supported and advised prior to the selection of subjects. Time allocation to Leaving Certificate Geography is in accordance with syllabus requirements. In the majority of cases classes are well spread across the week. The timetabling of geography lessons on consecutive days should be avoided if possible so that students are afforded more regular contact with the subject.

There is very good support for Geography from school management. The geography department has good access to a wide range of resources, audio-visual equipment and information and communication technology (ICT) facilities. School management is also very accommodating of requests for additional resources. An inventory of the resources available to Geography within the school should be compiled and included in the subject plan. This will assist teachers in identifying resources for teaching topics. There is a specialist geography room which is the base classroom of one teacher and it can be used if requested by the other teacher. This room facilitates the storage of resources and has enabled the development of a print-rich geographical learning environment which serves to promote the visible presence of Geography in the school. Teachers are deployed to the subject in line with their qualifications. The geography teachers have also significant expertise in ICT. The school’s recently developed Learn for Life (a moodle based e-
Learning environment) has been adopted enthusiastically by the geography department. The teachers have developed a variety of resources in Geography for this e-learning website. These contributions are lauded and reflect the teachers’ commitment to supporting and enriching students’ study of Geography.

School management encourages and facilitates teachers’ continuing professional development and pays membership fees of subject associations. It is recommended that the geography teachers become affiliated to the Galway Geography Teachers Network to obtain further support and information in relation to subject developments. Teachers have availed of in-service in relation to Leaving Certificate Geography and the use of ICT in teaching the subject. A number of whole-staff development days have also been organised with a focus on methodologies including differentiated strategies and co-operative learning. This is lauded in supporting teaching and learning in the school.

Planning and Preparation

The two geography teachers, both of whom are new to the department are planning in a collaborative manner for the further development of Geography in the school. There are good structures in place to support the planning process. Whilst the more experienced teacher acts as subject co-ordinator responsibility for planning is shared by both teachers. Formal meetings are held once a term and the issues discussed and the actions planned are recorded. This is good practice in supporting continuity of planning.

It is evident from a review of the subject plan that the teachers are engaged in meaningful review of the provision of Geography. The first-year teaching programme has been developed to include a range of topics of varying levels of difficulty. In line with the skills development approach adopted in the school at the start of the Leaving Certificate programme ordnance survey (OS) maps and aerial photographs should be introduced at an early stage in first year. These fundamental skills can then be integrated and developed in conjunction with other relevant topics on the programme.

The subject-department plan details subject aims and objectives, information on the operation of the department and practices in relation to homework, assessment, record keeping and reporting to parents. At junior cycle the department’s curricular plans are essentially a list of topics to be covered with each year group. These plans should be further developed to enhance planning for teaching and learning in a more strategic manner. The expected learning outcomes should be specified in relation to each topic and the methodologies and resources used to achieve these outcomes should form a central element of the planning process. Consideration should also be given to the assessment modes employed to monitor students’ progress. A comprehensive plan to for third year also needs to be developed.

At Leaving Certificate level an integrated approach to syllabus delivery has been adopted as opposed to a traditional linear approach. Whilst this provision is commended very careful attention should be paid to the selection of syllabus strands to ensure that the syllabus is delivered in a cohesive, structured and developmental manner. In this context the curricular plans should be developed further for the Leaving Certificate teaching programme. These should provide a clear picture of the sequence of the programme and the linkages it exploits.

The school provides the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and a number of students study Geography within the programme. It is strongly recommended that a formal process of
discussion be established between the new geography teaching team and the JCSP teaching team. These discussions should focus on the sharing of information in relation to students, methodologies and resources to ensure that the geography curriculum is appropriately differentiated to cater for the learning needs of students.

The TY geography programme consists of the Tourism Awareness Programme and a study of global warming. It is recommended that the programme also include a geographical investigation. This provision will facilitate students in developing key geographical skills and will effectively bridge the gap between junior cycle and senior cycle Geography.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

There was good preparation of resources to assist with the delivery of the lesson content. These included materials for map sketching and the use of ICT to conduct a class game ‘Who wants to be a Geography Millionaire?’. Short-term planning was good in that clear learning objectives were outlined at the start of lessons in the majority of cases. It is recommended in planning for lessons that clear and achievable learning outcomes are set for teaching and learning and communicated explicitly to students. This will clarify for students what they can expect to have learned by the end of class and will also provide a focused and sequential framework for lesson delivery.

The main methodologies in the lessons included teacher exposition, individual learning tasks, questioning of students and individual scaffolding of students’ learning. In all classes opportunities were created for students to actively engage with lesson material. Where this was most successful these activities were clearly linked to the learning objectives and the initial teacher instruction. In the map-work activities students completed the task well and their individual learning needs were well supported as the teachers circulated providing assistance where necessary. This is very good practice. However it is important in view of the breadth of the syllabuses that a balance is maintained between student activity and teacher instruction. In this regard short-term planning for lessons should ensure that clear and appropriate timeframes be set for all student-based activities which will encourage students to focus more quickly on the task and to progress in a more timely way with the activity.

Teacher-led instruction featured in all lessons. Given the broad range of abilities and the differing language needs of students careful attention needs to be given by the teacher to the simplification and grading of the language used in lessons. It is also recommended that key-word lists pertaining to the topic be written on the board at the outset of the lesson and a thematic glossary be compiled by students based on this list. As part of lesson recapitulation, simplified and visual lesson summaries should also be outlined on the board and students should record these in their copybooks. The geography teachers should implement a broader range of differentiated strategies for teaching and learning. This can be effected through liaison with the JCSP team. Further collaboration between the geography teachers on methodologies will provide a strong footing for the department as it moves forward. Where students are given sample examination questions to complete some preparatory work should first be carried out to assist with the task. The question should be pre-read to the students, the vocabulary explained, the main aspects of the question underlined and discussed and the relevant criteria for success explained. The use of a writing frame or some graphic organiser would be a beneficial way of training the students to structure their answers.
In lessons there were links made with previous learning to consolidate student understanding. One lesson commenced with a recap of the previous lesson. This is good practice and is encouraged in all lessons. A debriefing involving a short recap of the lesson should be conducted to allow all students across the range of abilities to show what learning had occurred for them during the lesson time. This affirmation will act as a motivational influence for further learning.

There was a positive and supportive atmosphere in the lessons evaluated. In the majority of cases classroom management was good. There were some instances where students presented with challenging behaviour. In these cases procedures for dealing with indiscipline should be consistently implemented in line with the school’s code of behaviour.

Where rooms were teacher based maximum use had been of wall space to create a print and visual rich geographical learning environment. This is good practice and there is for scope for its extended provision in other rooms where Geography is taught.

**ASSESSMENT**

Formal assessments for all students takes place at Christmas and for first-year, second-year and fifth-year class groups at the end of the third term. Students preparing for State examinations sit pre-examinations in the spring. Reports are issued to parents following all formal assessments. Communication with parents in relation to students’ progress and engagement with work is also facilitated through annual parent-teacher meetings and the student journal. It is good practice that certificate examination results are compared with national norms.

Project work is an integral component of the assessment of students’ progress in TY. This is good practice as it promotes independent learning and fosters the development of ICT skills. It is recommended that small-scale project work be used as an assessment instrument with other year groups. This will create further opportunities for students to engage in a practical way with lesson topics. The completed work should be displayed in classrooms to affirm students’ achievements and will serve as an additional motivational influence on learning.

Student learning was assessed informally in all lessons observed through questioning and the correction of class exercises. As students carried out learning tasks the teachers circulated monitoring progress and providing assistance where necessary. This is good practice. Homework was set in one of the lessons observed. It was noted from a sample of students’ copybooks that there is scope to increase the frequency of homework. In line with the school’s policy on homework it is recommended that homework be assigned in all lessons to help students reinforce and apply their learning. The standard of students’ written work reflected the diverse range of abilities in the class. There were also variations in the extent to which homework was corrected and provided with feedback. Very good practice was noted in the provision of developmental feedback to students on the geographical investigation. It is recommended that copybooks be regularly monitored and that students receive regular feedback on their work to help them in improving its quality. The website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment provides information on Assessment for Learning. As whole-class oral correction of homework is taking place students should also be required to tick their work accordingly. This will focus them on the task and help them to evaluate their own progress.

www.ncca.ie provides information on Assessment for Learning.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Geography is included within the school’s optional Transition Year (TY) programme.
- School management is very supportive of Geography in terms of the provision of a specialist room, resources and access to audio-visual and information and communication technology (ICT) facilities.
- The teachers have developed a variety of resources for the school’s Learn for Life, e-learning website.
- School management promotes and supports teachers’ continuing professional development.
- There are good structures in place to support the geography teachers in planning for the subject.
- There was good preparation of resources to assist with the delivery of lesson content.

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

- The lesson pace and clear and achievable learning outcomes should be central to short-term planning for lessons.
- Curricular plans should be further developed to enhance planning for teaching and learning in a more strategic manner.
- Formal collaboration should be established with the JCSP teaching team to support the geography teachers in implementing a broader range of differentiated strategies for teaching and learning.
- Homework should be set in all lessons and students’ work should be more regularly monitored and provided with developmental feedback.

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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