An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT

Athlone Community College,
Retreat Road, Athlone
Co. Westmeath
Roll number: 71410T

Date of inspection: 21 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 Athlone Community College. 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

In Athlone Community College business education is well represented through the provision of Business Studies at junior cycle and the business options, Accounting and Business, at senior cycle. In the past, Economics was also offered to senior cycle students but uptake in the subject declined and it is no longer offered in the senior cycle option bands. However, efforts are made each year to offer Economics to students who avail of exemptions from the study of Irish. The school’s management is commended for ensuring that, even on a limited basis, the subject remains on the curriculum and teachers have experience of the subject should demand for it increase among the wider student population.

The time allocation to the subject at junior cycle meets the guidelines. In junior cycle the time is structured as two double periods each year of the cycle. There is a very positive link between this time structure and the approach taken by the teachers to teaching of the bookkeeping elements of the junior cycle syllabus. While double periods are welcomed by teachers and the time is well utilised, efforts must be made to avoid scheduling double periods on successive days. Time allocation to senior cycle business subjects is very good with five periods timetabled for one year of the cycle and six periods in the other. Transition Year (TY) provision is also good.

It was brought to the attention of the school’s principal during the subject inspection that the current whole-school timetabling arrangements fall short of what is required with respect to instruction time as directed in circular M29/95 Time in School.

First-year students select their optional subjects prior to entry to the school. Great care must therefore be taken to ensure that high quality information is available to students when making subject selection as this will impact not just on junior but on senior cycle uptake of all optional subjects.
To support students in making an informed choice about subject options, the school holds an induction day for incoming first-year students. The content of business input during the induction day focuses on banking rather than the more usual theme of budgeting. This is a very good approach as banking would be more familiar to first-year students. Participation rates at junior cycle are good as evidenced by the recurring pattern of Business Studies as the highest optional choice of incoming first-year students. This does mean that business class sizes can be bigger relative to other optional choice subjects but this is managed well by the teachers. Teachers retain the classes throughout the cycle whenever practicable.

Among the range of supports to students, when selecting senior cycle options, is an information brochure produced by the school’s guidance department. Of particular merit is the indication that there are no pre-requisites for senior cycle participation in business subjects. This is consistent with the syllabus documentation and means that students who have not studied Business Studies are not precluded from taking senior cycle business subjects. This is very good given that junior cycle options are selected prior to entry in first-year.

Teachers are generally classroom based and the business classrooms are co-located. Currently the main resources used to support teaching in the subject are overhead projectors (OHPs) and handouts. There is a need to progress the use of information and communication technology (ICT) within the teaching of the subjects. The school is currently involved in a project to introduce LCD projectors to all classrooms. There will be associated whole-staff training in the use of ICT. This will be beneficial to the teachers as, though their level of expertise in ICT varies, all have made efforts to store and file materials and resources electronically. This variance does mean that teachers with more developed skills have a better opportunity to introduce students to ICT application of business outcomes. Therefore all business teachers must ensure that the use of ICT is integrated into teaching and learning.

The school’s management is supportive of teachers’ membership of the subject association. Though some teachers are more active than others, in terms of involvement with the subject association, it is apparent that all have endeavoured to engage with developments in the subjects. Of particular merit are the steps undertaken by the subject teachers to ensure that calculator usage for computations in junior cycle Business Studies is consistent with the methodologies used in Mathematics.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Comprehensive planning documentation has been drafted by the teachers of business subjects. The team meets regularly during the school year and records are maintained of the main meeting outcomes. The minutes of the meetings indicate that the role of co-ordinator rotates among the team. Though the composition of the team has varied in past years the membership has been relatively consistent in recent years and this is reflected in the quality of the planning and review systems in place. Of particular merit is the identification by the team of long-term and short-term goals for the development of the subjects at the first department meeting of each academic year.

Another significant strength in subject planning is the involvement of a school planning co-ordinator in the review of the subject department plan. The principal confirmed that as part of the whole-school approach to subject planning, the subject departments engaged in review can avail of this support. This is very good practice as it promotes shared good practice among and across subject departments.
In addition to the overall subject plan, detailed schemes of work have been drafted for the junior and senior cycle business programmes. Of particular merit in the subject plans is the variance in sequencing of topics from the textbook format. In junior cycle in particular, the sequencing of outcomes is influenced by agreement among the teachers as to the needs and interests of students and a best approach to the introduction and development of the bookkeeping outcomes. A similar approach is adopted at senior cycle. The senior cycle aspect of the overall plan includes the TY business modules and a section relating to senior cycle economics. Also included within the plan were resources on active teaching methodologies and while there was evidence of their use in the junior cycle lessons, there was less evidence of this approach at senior cycle. The suggested resources listed in the subject folder were good and relevant to the syllabus outcomes.

There are essentially three interrelated aspects to the department’s subject planning structures. The overall plan, individual teacher schemes of work and the teacher’s journal which records the completion of learning outcomes. It was evident from the review of documents that there is a high degree of consistency among the team in engaging with all aspects of the planning process. It is advised that the yearly schemes of work for individual teachers are included with the overall subject plan as they would provides very good support in the event of the absence of a teacher.

It was clear from the individual plans that some of the teachers actively promote and explore the links between business subject and the Link Modules of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). This information should also be included in the overall subject department plan. There is also scope to expand the detail included with respect to differentiation in individual plans. Good practice was evident in one folder where advice received from the special educational needs (SEN) co-ordinator as to appropriate teaching strategies for designated students within their classes was included.

Individual subject planning is very good and there is good practice in relation to the presentation of yearly schemes of work. The work rate is very good among the team and teachers are on schedule or ahead of schedule in terms of completion of topics for the academic year. All plans are presented and maintained electronically and this is very good as it facilitates ease of updating and amendment.

There is a very high degree of consistency in approach to individual lesson planning and excellent co-operation between team, as was evident from the sharing of resources, including question banks. Individual lessons were well prepared and there were some good examples where teachers sourced and adapted additional resource material for use in lessons. However, there is scope to improve the use of additional resources within lessons in order to develop students’ applied business skills, especially at senior cycle.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The overall standard of teaching and learning in the subjects was very good. There is a high level of collaboration between teachers in the subject department and team ethos is very strong. One example of this is the emphasis placed by business teachers on common practice with respect to class routines which is very good for creating and supporting positive learning environments.

Lesson aims were clear and communicated to students at the beginning of the lesson. Teachers’ preparation and the pace of lessons were very good. Of particular merit was the level of challenge included in the work, especially at junior cycle. The range of teaching methodologies used was broader at junior cycle than at senior cycle. At junior cycle there were good examples observed of
the use of teacher demonstration and guided practice followed by individual student work. Questioning styles were mixed and there were some good examples of the use of pair work, particularly with accounting.

The teaching aids used were largely traditional and there was a high dependency on the use of OHPs. While OHPs are very good for demonstration and illustrating the corrections associated with bookkeeping and accounting, there is a need to include other resources appropriate to supporting learning outcomes for all business subjects. The frequent use of OHPs results in an overuse of transcription to generate student support notes, especially for business theory at senior cycle. This is inconsistent with the more active methodologies used by the same teachers when teaching junior cycle. The business teachers are advised to reduce the dependency on transcription as a teaching method for senior cycle theory and adopt the approaches used at junior cycle. As the school extends the use of LCD projectors in classrooms, the business teachers are advised to explore the potential presented by the improved resources and extend the range of methodologies used to accommodate the range of student learning styles.

The interactions between students and teachers were respectful and teachers were affirming of students’ efforts. The teachers maintained a high degree of control with classes. The presentation of material by both teachers and students was very good and students mirrored teachers’ good presentation, particularly with bookkeeping and accounts elements. Current exemplars were used, for example a sample invoice from a local company, but there is scope to improve the use of ICT to present such material and make it more accessible to students.

Teachers make the most of the limited classroom space and paired seating is the appropriate layout for the subjects. The occupancy rate of classrooms in the school is very high given the number of students and the space available; however the school’s management have co-located the business classrooms. Most business teachers are classroom based and, while there was some evidence of students’ work displayed in the rooms, this was not evident across the year groups. Though the subject department aimed to include project work for within the current school year there was inconsistency in the attainment of the objective. This is an area that could be developed within the teaching of the subjects that would enhance the learning experiences of students in a practical and interesting way.

In junior cycle lessons, emphasis was placed on integrating both previous material with new topics and integrating business and bookkeeping elements. The team’s approach to the sequencing of bookkeeping topics and the promotion of integration is exemplary and best practice in the teaching of the subject and students’ understanding of the relevant concepts is very good. The approach taken provides a strong base for students to further study the range of business subjects at senior cycle.

Students’ learning in the subjects is good, particularly at junior cycle. While students in the lessons observed were generally quiet and passive, they were working diligently to complete the work assigned to them. When students did ask questions, they were answered positively and the answers used as an opportunity by teachers to reinforce all students’ learning.

In the lessons observed, students tended toward independent learning and there is scope to encourage collaborative learning, for example peer assessment, at junior cycle. In senior cycle business, there is scope to improve the opportunities available to students to demonstrate initiative and creativity in applying their knowledge and understanding to the current business environment. One suggested strategy is to use the opportunity presented by the improvements in classroom access to ICT to support this objective.
ASSESSMENT

Teachers’ records are very well maintained. Student attendance and homework completion are recorded using teachers’ journals. It is also important to note that the teachers keep daily records of the lesson outcomes completed and homework assigned. This is very good practice as it assists in ensuring smoothness and continuity in lesson delivery and supports good classroom discipline and atmosphere.

Homework is regularly assigned and techniques used range from lesson-based exercises to the assignment of question banks with longer deadlines for completion. At senior cycle, written homework assigned includes both short-answer and long-answer questions which are helpful in developing students’ higher-order skills. This technique is also beneficial in developing students’ capacity to take the subject at higher level.

In 2008/09 an assessment policy for the subject was developed within the context of the whole-school policy. A review of the discussion papers and interim policy documents indicate the quality of the discussion among the team. Though the final agreed document indicates some compromise on the earlier interim draft, it does indicate the ability of the team to evaluate and formulate policy. Among the features of the agreed policy is a very strong emphasis on continuous assessment and a requirement to annotate homework and include evaluative comments as part of homework corrections. The application of the policy by teachers is very good.

A review of the teachers’ records indicated that between eight and thirteen formal assessments had been completed across the range of subjects since the start of the school year. These assessments were mainly topic or chapter based. The whole-school policy is for two formal reporting periods per year, Christmas and summer, or Easter in the case of examination year groups. For TY students, as an assessment component, there is an exhibition of the project work of individual students at the year end and this is very good practice.

In the current school year, a decision was taken at school level to advise that class teachers correct students’ mock examinations in-house. Agreement was also reached that this work would be distributed among teachers to even out the burden between teachers of examination and non-examination classes. This is very good collaborative practice.

The performance of students in recent years in the subject at junior cycle is exceptional, both in terms of higher-level uptake and examination attainment. Analysis is undertaken at department and school level and the outcomes reported to the board of management. In addition to presenting the board with the grade analysis, the subject department should also present an analysis of the level of higher-level and ordinary-level take up of the subjects. This will provide the board with a valuable insight into the pattern of student achievement in the subjects.

For a school with this level of attainment, examination outcomes and techniques were not overly emphasised in the teaching of the subjects. Past examination questions were used primarily in summative assessments. The subject plan acknowledges the role of business teachers in developing subject-specific examination skills but clearly states that the promotion of general study and thinking skills, as outlined in the school’s guidance plan, is also important. This is very good practice as it emphasises the centrality of students as learners.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Whole-school provision and support for the subjects is good.
- Business teachers ensure that calculator usage for computations in junior cycle Business Studies is consistent with the methodologies used in Mathematics.
- Comprehensive planning documentation has been drafted by the teachers of business subjects.
- Individual subject planning is very good and there is good practice in relation to the presentation of yearly schemes of work.
- Classes are well managed with an emphasis on creating and supporting positive learning environments.
- The team’s approach to the sequencing of bookkeeping topics and the promotion of integration is exemplary and best practice in the teaching of the subject and students’ understanding of the relevant concepts is very good.
- Teachers’ practice in relation to record keeping is very good and it assists in ensuring smoothness and continuity in lesson delivery and supports good classroom discipline and atmosphere.
- The performance of students in recent years in the subject at junior cycle is exceptional, both in terms of higher-level uptake and examination attainment.

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

- At junior cycle, efforts must be made to avoid scheduling double periods on successive days.
- The management must ensure that the length of the school week complies with the provisions of Circular M29/95, Time in School.
- Business teachers must ensure that the use of ICT is integrated into teaching and learning.
- The business teachers are advised to reduce the dependency on transcription as a teaching method for senior cycle theory and adopt the approaches used at junior cycle.
- Improved opportunities should be available to students to demonstrate initiative and creativity in applying their knowledge and understanding to the current business environment.

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 report reflects the hard work of the Business Studies department. Much positive feedback is contained. Business Studies department have formally met and agreed to take on board the recommendations of DES and to implement these where feasible. As principal I will follow through with this.

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

1. In my initial planning of the timetabling 2011/12 I have addressed the scheduling of double periods on successive days.
2. With effect from 26/08/10 (school year 2010/11) the length of the school week complies with the provisions of circular M29/95. (Time in school).
3. With effect from 26/08/10 (school year 2010/11) Business teachers were supplied with laptops and Data projectors so as to ensure the use of ICT in teaching/learning – this is presently being successfully implemented.