An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT

Loreto College
Crumlin, Dublin 12
Roll number: 60800V

Date of inspection: 2 March 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN BUSINESS SUBJECTS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Loreto College, Crumlin. 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 was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Loreto College Crumlin participates in DEIS, the Department’s initiative for delivering equality of opportunity in schools. It is laudable that the school provides the full spectrum of programmes for its students: the Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JSCP), optional Transition Year programme (TY), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the established Leaving Certificate. Business education is a part of the curriculum in most of these programmes.

Business Studies is a core subject for the first year of junior cycle. This permits students to make informed subject choice decisions for the final two years of the cycle and provides each student with valuable financial life skills. At the end of first year, students choose three subjects from five optional subjects. The majority of students retain Business Studies to Junior Certificate.

Business is a core subject on the popular TY curriculum. Accounting and Business are optional subjects in the Leaving Certificate curriculum. The uptake of business subjects at Leaving Certificate is very good. Business teachers are involved in the delivery of LCVP and they successfully incorporate elements of this programme into all business education. Time allocation for the teaching of business subjects is generally good. Teachers in the business subjects department all experience teaching at senior and junior cycles.

Most business teachers are classroom based and in these classrooms there are some good examples of visually attractive and informative business-related posters and keywords. Nevertheless, there is scope to further develop visual learning environments in all classrooms where business education is being delivered. Most of the classrooms had audio and visual equipment that served as teaching and learning tools.

There is access to information and communication technology (ICT) in some classrooms and in the school’s two computer rooms. Senior management allocates a yearly budget to the business subjects department. Business resources are located in several areas of the school; it is advisable to note their location in subject planning documentation. This will facilitate the sharing and use of resources within the subject department.
All teachers in the business subjects department are skilled subject specialists with good up-to-date knowledge of their subjects and relevant business issues. Teachers have availed of whole-school in-service courses and are currently members of the Business Studies Teachers Association of Ireland (BSTAI). However, teachers were not aware of in-service opportunities or resources provided by the Department-sponsored Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). It is advisable that business teachers consult the websites of both organisations so as to keep up-to-date with current developments.

All students of business subjects are taught in a mixed-ability setting. It was evident throughout the inspection that the needs of students are central in the teaching of business subjects. There are good support structures in place to meet the learning needs of all students.

**Planning and Preparation**

Business teachers in the school have a good collaborative working relationship. However, there is no overall business subject co-ordinator. The three business teachers assume responsibility for individual business subject curricular areas. It is recommended that the business subject teachers appoint an overall co-ordinator from within the group. This position should rotate on a yearly basis. Senior management allocates time each term for subject planning meetings. The recorded outcomes of these good meetings are filed with planning documentation.

Each business subject has its own folder which contains a copy of the overall plan for the provision of business education and a curriculum plan for the particular business subject. The overall plan for the provision of business education is comprehensive and bears witness to the reflective practice of business teachers. Of particular merit are the business subjects department’s identification of its own good objectives on how business education is to be delivered and the evaluation of the needs and constraints in the provision of business education within the school. Planning documentation also informs teachers of students who require specific educational interventions and details the effective strategies and practical approaches that a teacher may use. It was evident that there is good liaison between business teachers and the JSCP and learning support co-ordinators.

The curriculum plans for Accounting, Business, Business Studies and TY business outlined the scheme of work for each subject with learning outcomes listed for each topic. Also included in the Business Studies plan was a list of keywords relating to each topic. In relation to numeracy, it is advisable that business and mathematics teachers confer on areas of similar practice such as percentages, and take a common approach to the teaching of these within the school. To build on good planning practice, it is recommended that the teaching methodologies, resources available, intended modes of homework, assessment tools and differentiated teaching strategies that are in the main body of the plan be aligned to each topic in the curriculum plans.

The Business module in TY gives a business perspective to students new to business while building and developing business expertise in students who studied Business Studies. The year-long Enterprise module develops an entrepreneurial culture in students as they compete in mini-company competitions and partake in the Junior Achievement Programme. On conclusion of the enterprise programme TY students complete a short module of business theory. TY students are encouraged to participate in the ‘Bank for the Future’ competition and help in the running of the school bank. The module befits the ethos of the TY programme.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

Five lessons were observed as part of this inspection. Lessons observed included a Business Studies lesson in each year of the junior cycle, and a double lesson of Business and a single lesson of Accounting in Leaving Certificate. A TY lesson was not observed; however the inspector met with a TY class group where a discussion took place on their enjoyable experience of business education. Teaching and learning was good in all lessons observed.

In lessons observed, teachers’ planning, preparation and pacing was good. 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.

Traditional and active methodologies were used successfully in lessons observed. In planning documentation teachers had outlined their desired approach in delivery of business education as ‘a communicative approach, with the teacher as an active facilitator of student learning and to strive to provide opportunities in the classroom for students to engage with one another to discuss material’. In most lessons it was evident that teachers put this ideal into practice as they chose an appropriate blend of methodologies in each lesson. However, in a small number of lessons, pair and group work was not used and should be introduced. Some of the other methodologies observed in lessons included teacher and student-led discussion, use of ICT, questioning techniques, and student involvement in board work.

In the lessons that focused on book-keeping there was good use and explanation of terminology as teachers helped students to understand concepts and accounting techniques. 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.

ICT was used in several lessons observed. A data projector was used to display well-constructed and visually attractive graphic and linguistic presentations and to access pertinent websites. Nevertheless there is scope to integrate more ICT into all lessons through the accessing of case studies, extracts of television programmes and interactive media resources, thus giving a real-life and dynamic focus to business education.

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 progress. In many lessons, teachers wisely encouraged students to expand and explain their answers. These good practices should be promoted in all lessons to develop higher-order thinking skills and class discussions.

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 encouraged to take an interest in topical economic events by following news items and business developments in the media. Business teachers sought to expand student knowledge and link business theory to students’ own experiences. In some lessons student explanation of keywords was good. 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.
ASSESSMENT

The school’s assessment and homework policies are followed by the business subjects department. Formal house examinations are administered twice a year and informal tests are normally conducted at least three times a year. 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 twice-yearly written report to parents and at the annual parent-teacher meeting.

TY students are assessed by class teacher observations on their participation in class and in mini-company, their written assignments, the quality of reports and their pair project work. To enhance the assessment process in TY, it is advisable that students make an oral presentation on some aspect of their work.

In planning documentation, business teachers noted the value of homework as a useful learning tool and it was observed that in all 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 and in some lessons students completed the board work themselves. Students’ account books, copybooks and journals were neat and well maintained. In a sample of homework copybooks, there were some evaluative comments made on students’ work. The use of evaluative comment is beneficial to students as it guides them in their learning. Therefore it is advisable that this practice be expanded within the business subjects department and that it be used particularly in senior cycle.

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 business teachers and it is advisable that they be compared to national norms so as to assist the business subjects department in its own self-evaluation.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The entire range of curricular programmes is provided in the school.
- All first-year students can avail of Business Studies and there is a good follow through with business education from junior to senior cycle.
- Subject planning is good as it informs, reflects on and evaluates the work of the business subjects department.
- Good teaching and learning was observed in lessons. Teachers are aware of students’ progress and are supportive and affirming in their interactions.
- Students are encouraged to achieve to their highest potential.

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

- An overall business subjects co-ordinator should be appointed
- In each business subject’s curriculum plan the methodologies, differentiated teaching strategies, resources, homework and assessment modes should be aligned to each topic.
Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of business subjects and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.