REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN BUSINESS SUBJECTS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Scoil Mhuire, Carrick-on-Suir, conducted as part of a whole school evaluation. 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 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. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Business education forms an integral part of most of the school’s curriculum programmes. Business Studies was an optional choice subject on the junior cycle curriculum, and is now a core subject. The stimulus to make the subject core was the availability of staffing resources in the school. Students in the Transition Year programme (TY) are afforded a taster of senior cycle business subjects and their participation in business enterprise competitions is supported. At senior cycle, Accounting, Business and Economics are provided on the Leaving Certificate curriculum. The uptake of business subjects at senior cycle is good. The school also provides the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) at senior cycle, in which business teachers have a considerable input. The school is to be commended on the good provision of business subjects for students.

There is excellent time provision for Business Studies at junior cycle. Students in first and second year are timetabled for four periods. In third year students have an additional class period every second week. Also in third year a second teacher is allocated to each group for one double period a week and, taking class context into consideration, teachers have the option to team teach or to have two small separate groups. This practice maximises the learning opportunities for students and is an indicator of the concern for students in the deployment of school resources. TY business students have three single class periods and timetabling at senior cycle for each of the business subjects is satisfactory. Teachers rotate within and between the junior and senior cycles and remain with their class group throughout the duration of a curriculum cycle. This is good practice.

There are four classrooms used almost exclusively by business teachers. This facilitates the use and storage of resources for teaching and learning in business subjects. In each of the rooms there is a stimulating print-rich environment with commercial, student and teacher generated posters. The posters displayed were attractive, colourful, professional and informative and served as valuable teaching aids. In each of the business classrooms, there was an open shelved area that provided easy access to the stored resources and books. Most business classrooms had notice boards that displayed current business-related newspaper and magazine articles. Most of the classrooms had televisions, audio and visual equipment that could be employed as teaching and learning tools. Senior management is commended on the provision of teaching materials.
Presently, there is some access to information and communication technology (ICT) through the provision of a mobile data projector for use in classrooms and through access to the computer room when it is available. One of the classrooms has two working desktop computers that are broadband enabled and these are available for student use, as are the five desktop computers in the school’s research room. From a discussion with senior management it was noted that there are plans in the school to develop an ICT strategy, its aim to make more use of ICT in teaching and learning. This is encouraged.

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 when they are provided. Teachers have attended LCVP in-service and Business Studies Teachers Association of Ireland (BSTAI) seminars, meetings and conferences. Teachers have also availed of whole-school in-service on topics such as differentiation in the classroom, dyslexia in the classroom and supporting the autistic student. It was evident throughout the course of the evaluation that teachers successfully incorporated strategies from these in-services in their teaching practices.

All students of business are taught in a mixed-ability setting. It was evident throughout the inspection that the needs of students were central in the teaching of business subjects. There are good support structures in place to meet the learning needs of all students. It is admirable that business teachers and senior management have developed strategies ensuring that all students achieve to their highest potential. Business students learning English as an additional language are provided with a business terms dictionary by the subject department, and this is good practice.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The business subject department has a co-ordinator; the role rotates among personnel in the department. This is good practice, as it allows for a sharing of expertise. The subject department is assigned formal time to meet twice a year. There are written records of these meetings.

The business department has worked collaboratively in developing a plan for each of the business subjects. The business plans have the required elements for good planning that include a curriculum plan for each subject and year group, the range of resources available in the business department, a list of methodologies and differentiated teaching strategies suitable for employment in the classroom. The planning of the yearly schemes of work was particularly good. Each curriculum topic was allocated a time frame, and its learning outcomes were noted as was the homework and the type of assessment suitable for the topic. To enhance the plans it is recommended that teaching methodologies, resources and materials within the business department be referenced to each curriculum topic. This will facilitate the use of a unified teaching and learning approach in all year groups. The plans were electronically generated and stored on a memory key that is available to all. This is good practice as it facilitates ease of access and amendment to the plans as needed.

TY is an optional and popular choice for students in the school. As TY students were away from the school on work experience it was not possible to visit any of their business lessons. However, from a review of the TY planning documentation it is evident that the teaching and learning strategies listed for use in the TY business module are active and engage the student in the learning process.
In all lessons visited there was evidence of good short term planning. Teachers were well prepared and organised; they used a range of teaching aids such as handouts, question sheets, newspaper articles, textbooks, posters, presentation programs and ICT. Of particular merit was the sourcing and use of topical and current economic items which served to develop and deepen students’ business acumen.

The additional teaching resources allocated to third year are effectively used. There is an excellent written communication system in place between the teachers who take the additional lessons and the class teacher. This ensures that all teachers and students are aware of planned and completed work and maximises the learning potential for students. This practice is highly commendable.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In lessons visited the topic, aims, learning outcomes and homework for the lesson were displayed on the board and remained there for the duration of the lesson. This is good practice as it conforms to the practice of Assessment for Learning (AfL). Lessons were well paced and structured and suited the mixed-ability setting of the classroom. Homework from previous lessons was corrected. Overall the standard of teaching and learning was good.

In the eight lessons visited a range of methodologies was observed, including pair work, ICT presentations, role play, case studies, class discussions, teacher-led input and interactive ICT lessons. In some double lessons visited a variety of active methodologies was used; this is commendable as it serves to engage different styles of learning and reinforces learning. As Business Studies is now a core subject on the junior cycle curriculum it is advisable that the business subject department decide collaboratively on the range and type of active and traditional methodologies to be employed to teach each curriculum topic. This will ensure that all students experience the curriculum in a similar manner.

In lessons where the topic had an accounting focus, a very good step-by-step approach was utilised by teachers who regularly checked on students’ attainment of learning outcomes. Teachers successfully integrated some theory aspects of the curriculum into accounting topics. Good practice was observed in a lesson on final accounts. Students were presented with a sample business that was displayed on a colourful and good visual power point presentation. Students had to compute the sales, purchases and all other relevant figures based on the sample business turnover. The computed figures when then used to compile the trading, profit and loss account. This approach was praiseworthy as students had a real life understanding of where the figures came from and what information their manipulation would provide.

A very good example of role play was observed in a lesson at junior cycle. Students assumed the role of government departments and ministers when compiling the national current and capital budget. Students clearly enjoyed this lesson as it allowed them to be active participants in their own learning.

Teachers’ and students’ use of business language and terminology was good in all lessons visited. There was good use of local, national and international business people and situations which helped to develop business knowledge, understanding and applied business skills. At senior cycle the use of current and topical economic and business issues was particularly admirable.
Where ICT was used in lessons as a teaching tool it was successfully employed. The power point presentations in lessons were good learning activities. In a lesson where students were revising a topic they used the computer room to partake in an interactive lesson and quiz. This was clearly enjoyed by students and helped to reinforce learning. As there is only one computer room in the school there is constant demand for its use. It was reported that teachers have endeavoured to counteract this by giving students websites to access as part of homework assignments during computer class time and at home. From a review of some students’ copybooks there was evidence of research conducted on the internet as part of projects and homework. This is good practice.

In most lessons observed, a range of global, targeted, higher-order and lower-order questions were employed to ascertain and develop student knowledge. In a senior cycle lesson there was good use of higher order questioning that led to good classroom discussions on the lesson topic, and this practice is praise worthy. In some lessons where global questioning was frequently used, the more confident students answered the questions. In order to engage all students in the learning process, it is advisable to extend the use of targeted questions so that it is a feature of all lessons.

Classroom management was very good; there was mutual respect and very good rapport between students and teachers. Students were affirmed and supported in all their interactions in the classroom. Classrooms were well maintained, bright, print-rich environments with seating arrangements that were conducive to pair and group work. The good teaching and classroom management practices created a good overall positive and affirming learning environment for students.

**ASSESSMENT**

In each lesson visited homework was assigned to students that reinforced and built on the learning of the lesson. From a review of a selection of homework journals it is evident that homework is given in most lessons and this is recorded by students. Homework is corrected in a number of ways that include oral corrections by student and teacher, written corrections on whiteboard or overhead and collection of work to be corrected by teachers outside of class. It some lessons teachers collect copybooks on a regular basis to correct and check on work. In some of the homework copybooks there was good and effective use of evaluative comments made on students’ work. This is good practice as it conforms to the ideals of AfL. From discussions with students, it was clear that they appreciated and valued this practice. It should be followed by all members of the subject department, especially at senior cycle.

A range of student copybooks was examined in each lesson visited. Copybooks were very neat, well labelled, dated and included graphic organisers to recap on the main points of topics. Good practice was observed in the storing of handouts and any additional paper resources used in lessons as items were taped into copybooks at the appropriate places. Teachers and students in the business subject department are highly commended on the exemplary standard of maintenance and care of copybooks.

Formal tests are held twice a year; the results are communicated to parents through a written report. At junior cycle common assessment takes place in first and second year. Students take informal class tests throughout the year, usually on completion of a topic. The results of these tests are mostly communicated to parents via the school journal. There is an annual parent teacher meeting where the students’ progress in business education is discussed Teachers and parents actively use the school journal as a means of communication with regard to student’s progress and this practice is praise worthy.
Student uptake of business subjects at higher level in certificate examinations is good as are the subsequent outcomes. Results in certificate examinations are not analysed by school personnel. It is recommended that this practice be adopted by the business subject department as it will assist in the process of self-evaluation.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Senior management is commended for the range of business subjects provided for students and the manner in which the students are at the centre of a supportive and affirming teaching and learning environment.
- All teachers in the business department are skilled subject specialists with good up-to-date knowledge of their subjects.
- Effective use is made of additional teaching resources with good records of communication between business class teachers.
- Student outcomes in state examinations are good and there is good uptake of business subjects at higher level.
- A good range of teaching methodologies was used and where ICT was used in lessons as a teaching tool it was successfully employed.
- Teachers and students in the business subject department are to be highly commended on the exemplary maintenance of copybooks.
- Business classrooms are effective learning environment and were stimulating and print-rich.

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

- To enhance subject planning the various teaching methodologies, resources and materials available in the business department should be referenced to each curriculum topic thus providing a road map for each subject.
- As Business Studies is now a core subject on the junior cycle curriculum it is recommended that the business subject department decide collaboratively on the range and type of active and traditional methodologies to be employed to teach each curriculum topic as this will ensure that all students in each year experience the curriculum in a similar manner.
- The use of evaluative comments on corrected assessments should be extended throughout the business subject department especially at senior cycle.

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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