

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Classical Studies
REPORT**

**Catholic University School
Leeson St, Dublin 2
Roll number: 60540V**

Date of inspection: 20 September 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 CLASSICAL STUDIES

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Catholic University School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Classical Studies 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 and teachers' written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the deputy principal and subject teachers. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix to this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Catholic University School (CUS) provides Classical Studies as an optional subject throughout the junior and senior cycles. Option bands are created following the best-fit model and the subject appears on one band in each of the Junior Certificate (JC) and Leaving Certificate (LC) programmes. Numbers in class groups fluctuates, for example, there are as few as eight in sixth year; there are fifty students in two class groups in third year; most other year groups range between eighteen and twenty students. This is an area that could be investigated to assist with planning. As resources and demand changes, it may become possible to offer Classical Studies on two bands thus maximising opportunities for students to study the subject. In the Transition Year (TY), students are allowed considerable flexibility that allows them to sample the subject. The Classical Studies team has designed a modular programme to accommodate the arrangements and this is commended. The school informs parents and students about subject choices. There are some opportunities to promote Classical Studies, for example, through the school tour to Italy. An article in the current edition of the school's yearbook profiles the tour and this is very positive. The school should consider further ways of informing students and parents about Classical Studies and of promoting the subject. For example, a link to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) "Fact Sheets" on all subjects including Classical Studies could be placed on the school website.

Timetabling allocation is good in the junior cycle. Timetabling allocation is very good in the Leaving Certificate (LC) programme with six lessons a week. Distribution should be reviewed in the case of two year groups. For example, first years have lessons on three consecutive days (Wednesday to Friday) and TY students have just two lessons on each of two consecutive days (Monday and Tuesday). In these specific cases, continuity of learning is a challenge since considerable gaps occur between lessons from one week to another. In sixth year, lessons are taught both inside and outside the timetable. This was found necessary in order to accommodate students' subject choices and ensure that all students who wished to take the subject had the opportunity. It is commendable that staff, management and students are willing to be flexible in this regard. Distribution is good in fifth year and all lessons take place within the timetable.

Clearly, the timetabling arrangements that obtain in fifth year create optimal learning conditions and this is a standard to which the school should aspire for other year groups. Students in all programmes learn in a mixed-ability setting and this is commendable.

The school is currently developing a team of committed teachers to deliver the subject. In due course, each is being afforded the opportunity to teach across all programmes and each is supported by the school as need dictates. Such a planned approach to deployment will ensure continuity into the future. There is a very good level of co-operation between teachers: ideas, resources and information are exchanged. In some cases, engagement in subject related personal continuing professional development courses is very good. The planning folder documentation is incomplete in this regard and it is one of the areas for the team to target. All the subject teachers' engagement in both subject specific and generic personal professional development should be recorded in the folder in order to identify the knowledge and skills that could be shared, to identify current needs and to plan for the future .

Classical Studies is a resource-intensive subject and a good range of audio-visual equipment, books and notes is available. Text resources are methodically stored in an annex to one of the classrooms and in the absence of a school library, this is very helpful to the team. Good organisation allows the system to work well but as resources become available, it would be desirable to have an independent space for storage to avoid disturbing lessons that are held in the adjacent classroom. While there is good provision of information and communication technology (ICT) equipment, security concerns in the school mean that digital projectors have to be stored centrally and collected as required and as available. This is challenging for staff who need constant access to such equipment, particularly since the campus is scattered and ease of access is not assured. To solve this dilemma, some team members have purchased their own ICT equipment and this shows considerable dedication. The school needs to review provision. For example, it may in time be possible, as resources permit, to provide a designated and secure space for Classical Studies text and ICT resources in a location convenient for and accessible to all the team members and the school should move towards this goal. It is reported that while there is internet access, connectivity is unsatisfactory and some teachers have independently taken measures to solve the problem. In the light of this finding, the school needs to carry out a general review of its ICT infrastructure to establish areas of concern and see how these might be addressed.

The school and teachers are commended for the provision of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities designed to help students learn about the classical world in sites outside the classroom. Apart from trips such as that alluded to above, there is a classical and historical society and attractive classroom displays of previous project work generate a great deal of interest in the subject. It would be ideal if there were a central space (in the absence of a school library) where such projects could be exhibited to all CUS students.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Loose planning structures are in place: there are two formal meetings on average per annum but regular informal meetings occur also. There is a subject convenor whose role is limited to an administrative function and the role rotates. Records of meetings are sent to management but are not kept in the department's planning folder. A record of all meetings should be maintained in the folder to inform future planning for the subject and to record progress in action planning. The school should reconceptualise the role of subject co-ordinator as a leader of learning. Duration of tenure should be sufficient for each to develop the role in a meaningful way and to allow him or

her to lead the design, planning and implementation of specific targets agreed collectively for Classical Studies by the subject department.

Planning for the JC and LC is structured on the syllabuses and it is commendable that there are detailed weekly schemes for all topics. This suggests a thorough and staged approach to syllabus delivery. The focus of the subject plan is on content, resources to be used and student activity in lessons such as use of worksheets or the task of reading sections of set texts. There is no reference to expected learning outcomes. It is recommended that henceforth, all planning should clearly define the expected learning outcomes across a wide range of skills as outlined in the relevant syllabuses and that these should then trickle down to individual lesson planning. The subject department should examine some of the rebalanced syllabuses currently published on the NCCA website for guidance in this area. The guide to the school's TY programme suggests a very ambitious plan for Classical Studies given the small timetabling allocation. However, the actual TY Classical Studies programme included in the planning folder is considerably refined. There should be concordance between the two documents. The school's guide should be reviewed to ensure that it is consistent with the programme being offered. Interesting modules have been designed for the TY Classical Studies programme and the duration and content of each varies. In view of current allocation and distribution of lessons and arrangements for access in TY, the content of some may prove challenging. A TY review should take place at the end of the current academic year to determine what is working and what is not. Consideration should be given to soliciting students' views through a survey to inform planning. In general, a review of planning should take place to identify the areas that need targeting and an action plan should be developed that is time-bound and specific.

It is commendable that the subject plan refers to learning-support guidelines and mentions some teaching methods to cater for those with special educational needs (SENs). It is reported that there has been some level of liaison with the learning support department in the past. CUS recently lost its learning-support co-ordinator and is currently developing personnel and structures to support students with SENs. As soon as possible, the Classical Studies team should profile specific students with SENs and those with language needs in their class groups to ensure that these target groups and individuals are supported in a manner appropriate to their needs. Planned extension activities for gifted students should be noted in documentation. A list of keywords should be devised for the subject and their use should be implemented in every lesson. It is reported that ICT is deployed by some teachers to assist all students including those with additional learning needs and one effective example is the recording of texts on the students' portable MP3 players. This is commended. Such strategies should be fully documented in the folder.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Lesson content was appropriate to the syllabus for the year group. Lessons were generally well structured and transitions from one stage to another were effectively managed, in one case, under difficult circumstances because some students were late for the lesson. It is positive that many lessons had a clear sense of purpose and students were immediately on task from the outset. To develop existing good practice further, every lesson should commence with the expected learning outcome (phrased as "the student will be able to...") being written on the board (or on a slide) at the start of the lesson. The end of the lesson should be used to establish if the outcome has been achieved. In one class visited, the level of challenge to students was too low and too much time was devoted to an activity that might have been best set as a research assignment to be carried out by the students at home. In all lessons, students should be sufficiently challenged by the content.

A good variety of resources, including ICT and film, was deployed to support learning and thorough advance preparation ensured the smooth running of all lessons. PowerPoint slides were effectively used for summarising key points and for organising content into smaller units for ease of comprehension. Props were used for demonstration purposes in a lesson observed and this is very good practice.

Teaching methods were appropriate to classes and levels and a variety of activities was designed to actively engage students in learning in most cases. Questioning technique was very good in some lessons where higher-order questions encouraged independent thinking: for example, students drew comparisons based on textual evidence in one lesson; in another lesson observed, they were encouraged to speculate and to draw conclusions based on empirical evidence. Some lesson content lends itself to a greater degree of student collaboration through pair work and this should be exploited more. In this regard, good practice was noted in one lesson observed. However, the roles of individuals involved in collaborative projects needs to be monitored by the teacher to ensure that all students are involved equally in learning and are challenged to achieve. It is commendable that students actively participated in class through discussion, interaction with teachers, and through drama techniques such as role play and mime. Students enjoyed such activities. Teachers drew on students' own experience to reinforce learning.

Classroom management was effective in all cases and good relationships between students and teachers promoted a positive learning climate in the classrooms. In a very small number of cases, teachers need to ensure that all students are engaged at all times as more articulate students were observed dominating class discussion while others were passive and silent.

The quality of learning was good in most lessons and very good in some cases where students displayed a confident knowledge of the subject, particularly in the senior cycle. However, revision of key concepts is needed in a couple of lessons observed. One of the risks of overemphasising content knowledge through the practice of summarising is that broader themes and ideas in a text are missed. The purpose of summary needs to be clearly understood by students and the refocusing of lesson planning and lesson delivery on student achievement of learning outcomes that are informed by the syllabus should be of considerable benefit in this regard. In a lesson visited, there was too much emphasis on the examination at far too early a stage in the students' learning. The consequence was to limit, not extend student learning and this was evident in the lesson: such an approach will not achieve syllabus goals. It is recommended that work on examination papers be confined to the examination year only and that focus be firmly placed on student learning guided by syllabus content and the subject department plan. When learning is firmly grounded, it follows that assessment outcomes will be satisfactory.

The evaluation took place too early in the school year to allow any firm conclusions to be drawn on work in copybooks and folders. Samples examined were well maintained. Student attainment is good (with some exceptional years), and in line with the school's context and expectations. Targets should be set in relation to attainment to ensure ongoing school improvement.

ASSESSMENT

There is very regular summative assessment through class testing and in-house examinations. Students' effort and commitment is also marked by the school and this is commended. Records are maintained.

Assessment for learning underpins practice. In some lessons, student self-assessment is encouraged: for example, students annotated their own work as a result of listening to other

students reading out their answers. In the best samples of homework seen (some dating from the previous academic year), students' work was affirmed with encouraging comments and teacher written notes guided learning. This is good practice.

The subject department should analyse data gathered from summative and other forms of assessment and use it to inform the planning and delivery of the subject. This data should be documented in the department's planning folder to assist in target setting.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Support for the subject is good in relation to curricular provision, timetabling and allocation of resources
- A committed and energetic team of teachers is currently being developed and this should ensure quality and continuity into the future
- The atmosphere in the school is conducive to learning and there is evidence of strong commitment to the subject on the part of all stakeholders.
- Teaching and learning is generally of good quality.
- Attainment is good.

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

- In planning and lesson implementation, the focus should shift to learning outcomes; a review should take place at the end of lessons to establish if all students have achieved the planned outcomes and if not, to identify areas that need to be addressed.
- All students should be sufficiently challenged by content and all students should be monitored for engagement in learning at all times. Key concepts require revision in some classes.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of Classical Studies and with the deputy 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 Board notes the very positive report on Classical Studies that has been given in the Inspection and the Board would like to commend all of those involved, including the Principal, Deputy Principal, Transition Year Coordinator and the Classical Studies teachers for their work.

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

The Board has asked the senior management and the teachers to consider how to further improve the teaching and learning environment for Classical Studies in the light of the recommendations of the report.