An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT

Coláiste Bríde
Enniscorthy, County Wexford
Roll number: 63570W

Date of inspection: 8 February 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 Coláiste Bríde, Enniscorthy carried out 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 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 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

In Coláiste Bríde, business education is well represented through the provision of Business Studies at junior cycle, mini-company and a business module in Transition Year (TY). At Leaving Certificate the three business subjects, Accounting, Business and Economics are optional subjects on the curriculum. This good provision indicates a commitment to business education within the school’s curriculum.

Business Studies is a core subject for first-year students and this provides valuable financial life skills for all students. From second year it is an optional subject and the uptake is very good. The school’s TY programme is an optional choice for students. The provision of business education on the TY curriculum allows non-business students from junior cycle to experience the subject. In the Leaving Certificate student uptake of Business is very good but this is not replicated in Accounting and Economics where there has been a decline in uptake of these subjects in recent years. Senior management together with the subject department should review uptake trends in Accounting and Economics and agree a common strategy to increase student participation in both subjects.

Timetabled allocation for Business Studies is two class periods per week in first year and four single class periods per week are provided for second-year and third-year students. Classes are evenly spread throughout the week ensuring regular contact with business subjects. Nevertheless, it is recommended that a double period should be provided at some point in the junior cycle so as to facilitate the teaching of book-keeping elements such as final accounts. Timetable provision for TY Business and Accounting and Economics in senior cycle is good. Business has three class groups in each year of the Leaving Certificate programme. In fifth and sixth year, two class groups are timetabled concurrently for three single and one double class period while the other class group is timetabled for four single class periods in fifth year and five periods in sixth year. This anomaly exists due to the positioning of other subjects in the option block. A remedy should be found to ensure that all business students have the same time provision.
Most business teachers are classroom based. In some of these classrooms there are displays of commercial and student-generated posters and notice boards are used to display topical news items. However, the potential to create visual learning environments in all classrooms could be further exploited.

The school’s management responds on a needs basis to teachers’ requests for acquisition of resources. Senior management is commended on having recently purchased an information and communications technology (ICT) resource that can be used in some business lessons. During the evaluation it was noted that there was no ICT equipment or overhead projectors in any of the classrooms where business education was being provided. In one lesson students used their personal laptops. However, all classrooms are broadband-enabled and wired for fixed data projectors which will be installed soon. This will be a desirable development as there is very limited access to the school’s computer room for business teachers and their students.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The eight business teachers meet in a formal capacity once a term. These meetings are often specific to a particular business subject rather than an overall meeting of teachers of all business subjects. It is understandable, due to the size of the business department and the number of teachers involved, that on occasion specific subject meetings are required in order to discuss issues pertaining to those subjects. However, it is advisable that at least one formal meeting be held each year where all teachers of business subjects attend as this will facilitate collaborative planning and discussions on common issues. From a review of the minutes of the meetings it is evident that the subject department continually evaluates and seeks to improve its practices.

The business subjects department has no formally appointed co-ordinator. To enhance the development of all business subjects, it is recommended that the department formally appoint an overall co-ordinator whose duties and role should be defined. This position should rotate annually among the business subject teachers in order to build capacity and develop leadership skills.

A comprehensive plan for each business subject and the modules that the school provides has been developed by the business teachers. The plans have all the elements of planning as outlined in the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) and include other data such as useful contact numbers, a list of available business resources and their location, notice board rota and a list of business terms. It is noteworthy that, in each of the business subject plans, objectives and aims specific to the provision of business education in the school are documented.

The mini-company TY plan is particularly good as it outlines the desired student learning outcomes and includes a range of activities and teaching methodologies appropriate to the aims and objectives of the TY programme. In the curriculum plans for first-year Business Studies the linking of the learning outcomes to each topic is good. It is recommended that, in the curriculum plans of business subjects, the learning outcomes of each topic be documented along with the methodologies and resources to be used and the homework that can be assigned. This will ensure that students all have a similar pedagogical experience, especially important in junior cycle.

Planning documentation includes a section pertaining to students with special educational needs. It is laudable that this section lists suitable teaching strategies and pedagogical approaches such as teaching for understanding, role play, and development of oral language and co-operative learning techniques that can be employed by business teachers in their classroom.
Notwithstanding the very limited access to ICT currently, in planning documentation business teachers are aware of its value as a teaching and learning strategy and state that “the business department members feel that ICT is probably one of the best resources we can have and that it can create a sensory and stimulating environment”. They also state that they can use the internet weekly to keep up-to-date with business developments and that student’s can Google topics themselves. In preparation for the anticipated development of ICT infrastructure in the school it is now timely to access and develop suitable ICT resources that can be used in business education and these can then be aligned to each topic in curriculum plans. The websites of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and the Business Studies Teachers Association of Ireland (BSTAI) have resources that may assist in this process.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

As part of the evaluation nine lessons, including two double lessons, were observed. This included lessons in Accounting, Business, Economics, TY mini company and a lesson from each year of junior cycle. All of the lessons had a coherent structure and were in most instances pitched and paced at a level that suited the range of student abilities and learning styles of the broad mixed-ability settings. It was positively noted that at the start of some lessons learning outcomes were shared with students. This proved effective in setting the scene and engaging students with lesson content. It is advisable that the use of this strategy be adopted by all business teachers. To maximise the learning potential of this strategy the learning outcomes could be revisited towards the end of each lesson.

In almost all lessons observed, teaching and learning was good. However, a number of areas merited concern. In most lessons teaching methodologies were mainly traditional and teacher-led. While peer evaluation of class work and pair work was used in a small number of lessons and group work was observed in the TY lesson, elsewhere there was little exploration of more active or co-operative teaching methodologies. Business teachers had noted in planning documentation an objective to “develop student team-work skills and encourage independent learning”. While it is praiseworthy that business teachers are aware of the value of active and co-operative methodologies, it is recommended that teachers now incorporate such methodologies into lessons.

Questioning was one of the main strategies used in all lessons to assess student’s understanding of material presented. However, it was not effectively used in all lessons. In some cases there was an over-emphasis on global rather than targeted questions and this often resulted in the more able student answering as a chorus. In a few lessons there were some good examples of questioning strategies that served to challenge students to analyse, interpret and apply information. In these lessons targeted questions were used effectively to differentiate between ability levels, develop higher-order thinking skills and class discussions. This good practice should be promoted in all lessons.

Most students had a range of copybooks that were used for notes and homework. An examination of these found they were well maintained and neat. From observation of a selection of students’ copybooks it was clear that they contained a substantial amount of notes transcribed during class-time. In some lessons additional paper-based resources such as handouts, word searches and worked solutions to questions were given to students. While there is merit in providing additional learning supports for students in the form of a handout or transcribed information from the whiteboard, it is necessary to ensure that there is not a duplication of information already in students’ textbooks. Alternatively, students could be encouraged to generate their own summary notes outside of formal class time and this could be form part of the assessment process.
As noted above, no overhead projector, ICT or multimedia equipment was used by teachers during the evaluation. There is scope for increased use of audio and visual aids in the teaching of business subjects. The judicious use of teaching aids seeks to address the various learning styles of students and provide efficiencies in class time management for teachers.

It was laudable that in one lesson a number of students had brought in their own laptops and were sharing them among students and in another lesson the teacher had incorporated the use of ICT for research purposes as part of the student’s homework. The use of ICT in classrooms will be a most positive development as business teachers can provide visual and audio resources and linkages can be made between classroom learning and real life situations.

Classroom management was good in all the lessons visited and a mutually respectful relationship existed between teachers and students. Teachers had a good rapport with students and positively reaffirmed their efforts. It was observed from minutes of meetings that business teachers plan and organise business-related trips outside the school for their students. This is good practice as it deepens student understanding of business practices.

**ASSESSMENT**

In all lessons observed homework was assigned to students. In some lessons good practice was observed where teachers wrote the homework on the board and ensured that students recorded this in their journals. As evidenced from a sample of homework journals from each lesson, this practice is not consistently followed. In some lessons students’ homework often consisted of “re-read or learn notes” and in some lessons no homework was allocated. It is recommended that students receive regular well-monitored homework in each lesson so as to maximise the learning objectives of lessons. The business subjects department should discuss and agree on what is an appropriate quantity and form of homework for each topic in all business subjects. This could be done in the context of ongoing subject planning.

Homework from previous lessons was corrected by oral answers by teacher or student and by teacher written solutions. Good practice was observed in a small number of lessons where teachers checked students’ work and noted in journals if homework was not attempted. There was some evidence of cursory ticks in students’ copybooks and in a minority of copybooks some evaluative comments were noted. In this context, it is advisable to include assessment-for-learning (AFL) techniques for use in the business subjects department as this will enhance the learning experience for students. The website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie) provides information on AFL that may be helpful in this regard.

Each class group sits formal assessments at Christmas and the end of the academic year. A common assessment paper is available to use for junior cycle students and this is good practice. Students in junior and senior cycles are also informally assessed on the completion of each curriculum topic. Assessment in TY is measured by the subject teacher and includes an evaluation of projects completed during the year and a written assessment. Teachers maintain records of all assessment outcomes and this along with student progress in business subjects is communicated to parents by written reports and at parent-teacher meetings.

Students are encouraged to achieve to their highest potential. A review and analysis of examination outcomes is conducted by the business subjects department. Business teachers can compare school results with national norms and this is good practice. The outcomes within each level at certificate examination are good within the context and abilities of the students. However,
further analysis is required of the profile of students taking higher level Accounting and Economics in certificate examinations in order to maximise participation at this level.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is good uptake of Business Studies in junior cycle and Business in senior cycle with a high percentage of students continuing with business education after junior cycle.
- The business subjects department have regular meetings where teachers evaluate their teaching practices.
- Business subject plans articulate school specific aims and objectives. The planning for the TY enterprise module is very good.
- Business teachers are aware of the range of effective teaching strategies for students with special educational needs.
- All teachers supported and affirmed students’ efforts and are to be praised for the organisation of business-related outings for junior cycle students.

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

- A double period should be provided in second-year or third-year Business Studies.
- It is recommended that an overall co-ordinator for the business subjects be appointed and that this position be rotated within the business subject department.
- The business subjects’ curriculum plans should include the following for each topic: specific learning outcomes, a range of teaching and learning methodologies, a list of paper and ICT resources and the homework that can be assigned.
- It is recommended that active and co-operative teaching methodology be incorporated into classroom pedagogical practice.
- A strategy for the assigning, student recording and correction of homework should be agreed and implemented by business teachers.

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.

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