Subject Inspection of Home Economics
REPORT

Our Lady’s College, Greenhills,
Drogheda, Co. Louth
Roll number: 63850F

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REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HOME ECONOMICS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Our Lady’s College, Greenhills. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Home Economics 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 principal and subject teachers. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Home Economics enjoys a high profile in Our Lady’s College. The range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities organised by the home economics team actively promotes the subject within the school and the wider community. Of particular note is their role in initiating and driving the very successful healthy eating project in the school.

First year is planned as an exploratory year where students sample a range of subjects before making final decisions for their Junior Certificate. While this arrangement is beneficial in informing subject choices, the current programme merits review for a number of reasons. Firstly, in order to accommodate the large number of subjects studied in first year there is a shortfall in available tuition time for some subjects. Home economics students attend the equivalent of three lessons per week. Best practice in the timetabling of Home Economics is where classes have the equivalent of four class periods per week. Secondly, final decisions regarding subject choices for second year are taken in March of first year. This means that students are studying some subjects for an additional length of time, having already decided that they do not wish to study them for the Junior Certificate. Consideration should be given to the provision of a sampling programme for just part of first year. At the end of the sampling programme, given the popularity of Home Economics it is recommended that the subject be placed on more than one option line. This would provide greater flexibility to students when selecting subjects and alleviate some of the pressure currently experienced in accessing specialist rooms.

Very good efforts are made to devise a senior cycle programme to meet student needs. The Transition Year (TY) home economics module provides an opportunity for students to experience a range of activities and supports them in making informed Leaving Certificate subject choices. Leaving Certificate option bands are generated from an initial survey of students’ preferences. Home Economics is available on two option lines. These are very good practices. Uptake of Home Economics is consistently very good. The home economics department also makes a very
positive contribution to the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme through the provision of the vocational specialism Hotel, Catering and Tourism (HCT).

There is appropriate timetabled provision for Home Economics in almost all instances. However, some issues impact on effective continuity in teaching and learning and should be addressed in the context of future timetabling. In one instance two teachers are deployed to teach the same class. This is unsatisfactory practice. The teaching of Home Economics requires the integrated application of all the related core disciplines as well as the integrated delivery and application of relevant practical coursework components. Such an approach is very difficult to achieve when two teachers share a class. In other instances double lessons are split by break time or lunch time. This practice should be avoided. Uninterrupted double periods are necessary to enable students to develop essential time management skills in the area of culinary skills in preparation for the practical food and culinary skills examination. In general there is a very good spread of class contact time throughout the week. However, in instances where classes meet their teachers for two double lessons each week, they should not be timetabled over two consecutive days.

Leaving Certificate Home Economics students are streamed into higher and ordinary level classes after mid-term break in fifth year. It is recommended that this practice be reviewed and the mixed-ability setting be maintained for as long as possible in the Leaving Certificate programme for a number of reasons. Firstly, students may take up Home Economics in fifth year and therefore need a chance to settle into the subject. Secondly, the home economics syllabus has been designed to be taught in a mixed-ability context and the active teaching strategies underpinning syllabus implementation can foster a sense of collaborative learning among students. The benefits of the existing concurrent timetabling arrangements in facilitating student movement between class groups can be realised at a later stage in the senior cycle.

All home economics teachers display a very high level of commitment and enthusiasm for the continued development of high-quality subject provision in the school. There has been a very good level of engagement with relevant continuing professional development (CPD). It is obvious that the experience gained has impacted positively on the quality of learning and teaching of Home Economics in the school. Teachers retain their classes through all the years of the junior or senior cycle. This is good practice. It was noted that deployment to teach on curricular programmes is not rotated among all the team members. There is a very high level of experience and expertise evident among the home economics team. In order to develop the collective expertise of the whole teaching team, it is recommended that home economics teachers be deployed on a rotational basis to teach on all programmes if they so wish.

Four well equipped and well maintained specialist rooms are available. Systematic procedures are in place to support the ongoing maintenance of each room. Senior management is very supportive of requests made for additional resources. It was noted positively, where required, that the school provides the necessary ingredients for practical lessons. This practice is indicative of the inclusive ethos evident in the school.

The home economics team needs to review their use of the specialist rooms. It is established practice that the kitchens are not used for theory lessons. This results in a lot of unnecessary movement of teachers, students, and equipment between classes, sometimes in the middle of a double lesson. It is recommended that the home economics team should revise this practice. Maximum use should be made of each specialist room for all lessons. On the few occasions that there are more than four home economics lessons timetabled concurrently, senior management should allocate a classroom to the teacher concerned on the master timetable at the start of each academic year.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject department planning is well established in Home Economics. A highly organised and collegial approach underpins the work of the team. Meetings are held regularly. An agenda is prepared and records are kept to facilitate continuity between meetings. Very good links are maintained with senior management. This fosters a cohesive approach to school planning. With effect from this year the role of co-ordinator will rotate among the home economics team. This very good practice will help to build capacity.

The subject department plan is very well developed and a culture of self-evaluation is evident. To enhance this practice it is recommended that the headings in the plan such as timetabling, planning for cultural diversity, class organisation and planning for special educational needs, be used as prompts to critically appraise actual practice rather than provide a generic description of what could be done. This will ensure that an informed and pro-active approach is taken to the continued development of Home Economics in the school.

Programme plans for each syllabus have been evolving over many years. Learning outcomes are now included for some topics. This good practice will support planning for differentiation. It is recommended that learning outcomes also be devised for procedural and practical knowledge that students are expected to acquire. This will enable the team to critically analyse if an incremental and coherent approach is being adopted to the completion of practical coursework and the integration of all stages of the design brief process.

At present the Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate programme plans are presented as separate lists of topics for each core area and elective. This has led to varying practice across classes in the sequencing of topics and the integration of practical coursework assignments. It would be more beneficial if each programme plan integrated the theoretical and practical components of the relevant syllabus. It is recommended therefore that each programme plan be collectively reviewed and presented as a sequence of lessons that demonstrates an incremental and integrated approach to the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills. In sequencing lessons there is a need to integrate topics and consequently learning outcomes from within and across core areas of each syllabus. Home Economics is an applied subject. Therefore, the range of practical coursework completed from first year through to third year as well as the sequence of completion of the Leaving Certificate food studies assignments should be carefully monitored so as to ensure that opportunities to integrate relevant theoretical knowledge are optimised. In reviewing the Junior Certificate plan it is recommended that the completion of the optional study be moved to a later stage in the second year of the programme.

Very good planning for TY Home Economics is evident. The learning outcomes allow for adequate differentiation to support the learning needs of students who may not have studied Home Economics for their Junior Certificate while at the same time challenging those who have previous experience of the subject. The teaching strategies deployed are both innovative and creative. Students’ experiences and a formal evaluation of the module inform subsequent planning for TY. This is very good practice.

The importance of differentiating for students with additional educational needs is recognised by the home economics team. There is good collaboration with the learning- support department and teachers are aware of the needs of students who have individual education plans. This information
is then used to inform subsequent teaching and learning strategies. This is very good practice. The team has prioritised planning for differentiation in lesson delivery. In this context the home economics team may find the E-leaning site set up by the Special Education Support Service (www.elearning.sess.ie) and their associated publications useful resources.

A very good range of additional resources has been compiled by the home economics team. A resources catalogue has been compiled and ICT is being used effectively to facilitate shared access to resources. Very effective links have been established with outside agencies and local industries to support teaching and learning in Home Economics.

A very committed and conscientious approach is taken by all teachers to planning for individual lessons. High quality reflective practice on the effectiveness of the teaching strategies deployed in lessons was noted in some individual teachers’ planning folders. There was thorough preparation for all of the lessons observed. This included the advance preparation of a range of additional resources to enhance students’ learning. Written lesson plans carefully outlined the key learning outcomes and deliberate efforts were made to incorporate a range of teaching strategies to support students’ learning.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Competent teaching was evident in all of the lessons observed. Lessons were purposeful and had a clear focus with some very high quality teaching and learning evident. On occasion there was scope to adjust the pace or pitch of the lesson content to a level more commensurate with students’ needs or stage in the programme. This issue should be rectified when the recommended revisions to the programme plans, as outlined earlier in the report, are implemented by the team.

Learning objectives were shared with students from the outset of most lessons. This good practice provided a focus and assisted in the development of a logical lesson structure. In one lesson this strategy was developed further. The teacher, after listing some of the learning outcomes on the board, asked the students to suggest what other information should be known about the topic. This proved highly effective in engaging students in the lesson content and creating a sense of shared ownership of the lesson material. It is recommended that learning outcomes be shared at the outset of all lessons.

In each lesson observed the home economics teacher displayed very good subject knowledge and a commendable emphasis was placed on attention to detail in the explanations of new information. Explanations were clear, accurate and contextualised. Some very good links were made with previous learning and interrelationships with other topics highlighted. This practice is encouraged in all lessons. In all lessons additional resources such as 3-D models, exemplar products and visual images were used to very good effect to clarify points of information. A very good emphasis was placed on checking students’ understanding of the key terminology associated with the topics being taught. This is very good practice.

There was some excellent integration of ICT in the lessons observed. Some of the PowerPoint presentations were cleverly designed to support learning. For instance key words were highlighted, or graphics and charts effectively summarised information and actively engaged students in the learning process. Best practice in the use of ICT presentations was in instances where students were given a copy of the presentation to allow them to underline key words or make additional notes arising from the class discussion. One particularly effective use of ICT
occurred in a lesson where a video clip was shown to illustrate a food production process. The clip was very appropriate to lesson content and illustrated the key points previously covered. A subsequent plenary session with students showed that meaningful learning occurred.

In keeping with good practice active learning was a regular feature of lessons. Group work was observed in a number of lessons. Care should be taken when planning group work. The strategy proved most effective in lessons where the task assigned was clear and pitched in accordance with students’ needs, and where students filled out an accompanying worksheet that could be checked by the teacher to assess what learning had occurred.

In the practical food studies lesson observed, the preparation, cooking and serving of dishes were effectively “staged” through spot demonstrations which illustrated the key food preparation and cooking processes to students and reinforced the application of scientific principles to practical skills. This typifies best practice in the teaching of food studies. Students displayed a very high standard of practical and procedural skills and sound safety and hygiene routines were evident. It was noted positively that the evaluation stage is routinely included as an integral component of the lesson. A range of evaluation templates is used and these templates are systematically filed by students and routinely monitored by the teacher. This exceptionally good practice supports students in the incremental development of higher-order evaluative skills. To enhance practice, it is suggested that the evaluation sheets are given to students at an earlier stage in the lesson so that they can fill out the relevant sections when time allows.

In some lessons students’ learning was particularly well consolidated. Questioning was well used to check understanding and to constructively provide additional clarifications. In one lesson individual students had to explain one new fact that they had learned in the lesson. This provided additional opportunities for the teacher to affirm student contributions and to provide additional information. In other lessons questioning was used to assess students’ learning. Best practice occurred in instances where students were given adequate time to answer the questions asked, without teacher intervention, and where higher-order questioning challenged students to apply the information and make links with previously taught material. To optimise students’ learning it is recommended that time is taken towards the end of each lesson to re-visit the planned learning objectives. This would provide further opportunities to assess students’ understanding of lesson content and to clarify points of information.

There was some variation in the standard of organisation and maintenance of student notebooks observed during the evaluation. Some very good practice was evident. It is recommended that the home economics team establishes agreed procedures and routines for the maintenance, organisation and use of notebooks for all classes. Students should be encouraged to retain the same notebook throughout the programme so that key points of information covered in lessons together with related handouts and worksheets can be stored for ease of reference and revision.

Students are making very good progress in Home Economics. Interaction with and observation of student activities indicated that they had a good grasp of the key concepts being taught in each classroom visited. In one lesson observed excellent teaching and learning strategies were deployed to support LCA students in completing tasks. As evidenced by the tasks reviewed, the strategies enable students to complete projects that are very well structured and illustrate very good levels of research and analytical skills. In Junior Certificate, student originality and creativity is fostered through the completion of design and craft items and a very good range of manipulative skills is developed. However, in some instances students would benefit from further advice on the completion of their written design and craftwork folder or childcare project. It is recommended therefore that the chief examiners’ reports and associated marking schemes
published by the State Examinations Commission (www.examinations.ie) be used to inform the development of such teaching methodologies. The strategies used in LCA could prove particularly effective. These strategies could then be integrated into programme planning to support high quality learning. Very good student routines are evident for the completion of the Leaving Certificate food studies coursework journals.

It is clear that students enjoy Home Economics. Students’ efforts were affirmed and encouraged at all times. It was very evident that a climate of care and inclusion permeates the atmosphere of all home economics lessons. The displays of up-to-date information on themed notice boards and the use of appropriate educational posters in each specialist room created an environment that was both stimulating and supportive of learning. Student achievement is celebrated through the displays of project work and photographs of student work.

ASSessment

A range of assessment modes, both formative and summative, is used to monitor students’ progress. Ongoing formative assessment is by means of short class tests, continuous assessment of project work and practical coursework and homework assignments.

The good practice of setting common written end-of-term examination papers was noted. Some very good use is made of past examination papers to inform the drafting of the in-house examinations. However, the format and pitch of the first-year in-house examination should be reviewed. As all students at this stage are still aiming for higher level, the paper format should be indicative of the style used for the Junior Certificate higher level paper. Furthermore in finalising an end-of year mark for students in first and second year, it is recommended that consideration be given to the inclusion of an examination of all of the relevant practical coursework components. This would allow for the provision of the aggregate mark which is a more accurate indicator of students’ progress than solely basing the grade on a written paper only. The marking schemes issued by the State Examinations Commission should be used to inform planning the assessment criteria used.

Homework is regularly assigned to all classes with high quality monitoring of work noted in some students’ copybooks. In some instances teachers provided valuable feedback on students’ written work. This very good practice enhances learning by informing students about their own individual progress, highlights areas for improvement and assists students to reach their full potential. There is scope to extend this very good practice. It would be useful for the home economics team in reviewing the homework policy to share best practice for the assigning and monitoring of students’ work.

All teachers keep very good records of students’ progress and a very good level of contact is maintained with parents. Student outcomes in the certificate examinations are generally very good. However, considering the exceptionally good overall levels of student attainment at ordinary level Home Economics there is scope for the team to judiciously increase participation rates at higher level in both the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations. It is good practice that the team regularly analyses student attainment in the certificate examinations. It is recommended that the home economics team uses the outcomes of this analysis together with the findings of relevant chief examiner reports to identify positive trends and devise teaching strategies to support the areas identified as in need to further development.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Home Economics enjoys a high profile in Our Lady’s College. Very good efforts are made to actively promote the subject within the school and the wider community.
- The home economics teaching team displays a very high level of commitment and enthusiasm for the continued development of high-quality subject provision in the school.
- A very good range of specialist resources is available to support students’ learning in Home Economics. Systematic procedures support the ongoing maintenance of each room.
- Subject department planning is well established in Home Economics. A highly-organised and collegial approach underpins the work of the team.
- Very good planning for TY Home Economics is evident. The learning outcomes allow for adequate differentiation to support the learning needs of all students.
- A very committed and conscientious approach is taken by all teachers to planning for individual lessons and competent teaching was evident.
- There was some excellent integration of ICT in the lessons observed.
- A climate of care and inclusion permeates the atmosphere of all home economics lessons.
- Excellent teaching and learning strategies are deployed to support LCA students in completing tasks in Hotel, Catering and Tourism.
- All teachers keep very good records of students’ progress and a very good level of contact is maintained with parents.

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

- The timetabling issues that are impacting on continuity in teaching and learning should be addressed and teachers should be given the opportunity to teach on all curriculum programmes.
- The mixed-ability class setting should be maintained for as long as possible in the Leaving Certificate programme.
- Programme plans should be collectively reviewed and presented as a sequence of lessons that demonstrates an incremental and integrated approach to the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills.
- The chief examiners’ reports and associated marking schemes published by the State Examinations Commission should be used to inform the development of teaching strategies to support the completion of the Junior Certificate optional studies.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of Home Economics 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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