

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT**

**Sancta Maria College
Rathfarnham, Dublin 16
Roll number: 60341P**

Date of inspection: 3 March 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 BUSINESS SUBJECTS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Sancta Maria College. 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 and examined students' work. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

In Sancta Maria College, Business Studies has been an optional subject in the junior cycle curriculum since 2006. While in sixth class, prospective students are given information about the optional subjects by the school's guidance counsellor. Prospective first-year students are asked to choose two subjects from the list of five subjects including Science, Business Studies, Art, Music and Home Economics. An evaluation is then undertaken of the individual student's choices. This includes a compilation of identified competencies from the school's entrance tests and information pertaining to the student's skill set as observed in her primary school. Students come into first year having made their subject choices and if students wish to change from an optional subject to another it is reported that they have till the mid-term break to do so. The uptake rate of Business Studies is well below the national norm. It is recommended that an analysis and review of factors influencing the subject choice of incoming first-years be conducted by senior management and the business subject department. Following this review, a strategy should be put in place with the objective of increasing student participation in Business Studies. As part of this review, the provision of a taster programme that facilitates the making of informed subject choices should be considered for discussion.

Students in the school can avail of the optional Transition Year (TY) programme. There are two TY class groups, one of which has a Business module on its curriculum. Business and Accounting are provided as optional Leaving Certificate subjects. Students in third year and TY have an opportunity to attend a "subject fair" in the school and talk individually to the guidance counsellor before they indicate their subject preferences. Parents are also invited to a meeting in the school where they are made aware of the programmes and subjects available at senior cycle. A high percentage of Business Studies students at junior cycle take one or both business subjects at senior cycle. In Accounting and Business uptake rates are very good.

As most classrooms are student based rather than teacher based there are no dedicated business rooms in the school. As a result, such items as teaching aids, business resources and business-related posters and visuals cannot be used to their potential. While there is a business section in the school library that contains old textbooks, some *Economist* magazines, case studies and other

related business materials, there is no central storage area for business-related resources and materials. It would be prudent to identify an area in the school where business resources could be stored and easily accessed by all in the business subject department for use in the classroom.

Four teachers form the school's business subjects department, and all are deployed in accordance with their subject specialisms. In 2009/10, a student teacher has been offered teaching hours in business subjects and has been given responsibility for some class groups. Mentoring arrangements in such cases should be agreed with senior management and included in subject planning.

There is some limited access to information and communication technology (ICT) for business students in the school. There is one mobile data projector and laptop that can be pre-booked for use in classrooms and there is some access to the two computer rooms when they are available. The majority of classrooms are broadband enabled. The library also has some ICT facilities that can be used by students and teachers. Commendably, a teacher in the business subject department has pioneered the use of 'Moodle' in the school and has given in-service to school staff. Some business resources have been uploaded to the school's server for student access through 'Moodle', and this innovation is highly commended. The Business Studies syllabus has specific ICT objectives and the teaching and learning in all business subjects should incorporate ICT. It is incumbent on senior management and the business subject department to put in place strategies to include ICT in teaching and learning of all business subjects.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The business subject department has no formally appointed subject co-ordinator or convenor. It is recommended that the business subject department formally appoint a subject co-ordinator or convenor and that the role is defined by the business subject department. This position should rotate among the subject teachers in order to build capacity within the business subject department.

Senior management allocates three one-hour time periods notably in May and September to discuss planning in the business faculty. The agenda for these meetings is predetermined by senior management. From a discussion with senior management it was noted that topics generally discussed include an evaluation of timetable requests and discussions on resources and the textbooks to be used for the teaching of business subjects. A planning folder that contained minutes of these meetings was made available to the inspector. It appears that no records of any meetings have been maintained in this file since 2005.

The subject department planning folder contained the curriculum plans of individual teachers for the 2009/10 academic year. Most of these curriculum plans noted the chapter or unit to be taught in each term and how assessment would be executed. The folder contained no overall plan for the teaching and learning of business subjects, although there were some notes pertaining to common assessment and samples of exam questions. It is strongly recommended that a coherent developmental plan be put in place for the teaching and learning of all business subjects and modules in the school. The plan should incorporate the learning outcomes, the resources available and the range of methodologies and types of assessment that can be employed for each curriculum topic. The contextual factors pertaining to student access to business subjects should also be noted. It is desirable that a team approach be adopted for subject development planning. A collaborative approach facilitates the sharing of best practice and ensures that students receive a similar teaching and learning experience at the various stages of their business education. There

are resources available that may assist in this planning process on the School Development Planning Initiative website (SDPI) at www.sdpi.ie.

The planning process will take time; at the start of the process a three-year action plan with specific and measurable targets should be agreed by members of the business subject teaching team. It was noted during the evaluation, that there are opportunities at the start of the academic year to dedicate time to planning activities. When the plan is completed, a review and analysis should take place on a yearly basis.

Individual lesson preparation and planning was good in most cases. Supplementary aids such as handouts, questionnaires and newspaper articles were prepared in advance of lessons.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

As part of the evaluation six lessons were observed, and each year-group with the exception of sixth year was visited. All class groups were of mixed ability. Teaching was generally competent but frequently did not engage students sufficiently in the learning process, although some good instances of whole class discussions and good approaches to specific topics were noted. The pace of the lessons was satisfactory for most ability groupings in the classes visited. Lessons followed a logical sequence that included roll call, correction of previous homework, introduction of new material and setting of homework. In all lessons observed teachers managed the class well.

Teachers were skilled specialists and had good subject knowledge. However, the teaching methodologies employed were predominantly traditional whole-class teaching, in which the teacher talked through the topic and students listened, answered questions and occasionally interacted in discussions. An evaluation of students' copybooks and journals indicated that a traditional approach is the norm. As a result, in some lessons students were passive in their learning. As an overarching recommendation, more active and varied teaching methods should be introduced into all lessons. This approach will seek to engage students in classroom learning. The website of the Business Teachers Association of Ireland (BSTAI), www.bstai.ie, and the Second Level Support Service website, www.slss.ie, contain presentations and resources that may assist in accessing suitable methodologies.

In a junior cycle lesson observed, teachers employed a good discursive approach. Students had concluded a topic and, as a means of assessing their level of understanding, the teacher engaged the whole class in discussion, which the students clearly enjoyed. In the same lesson the teacher used actual banking documents and cards to assist learning by giving the topic a real life focus. This is good practice as it makes learning meaningful and should be used in as many lessons as possible.

In some lessons, there was linkage of topics to real life, local and national situations. In these cases, it was laudable that teachers drew on their own life experiences in business and shared it with their students. Where used, references to topical and current newspaper and current affairs items were good. However, from observation of lessons and discussions with students, their critical thinking and application of business concepts to everyday living was clearly an area for development. The greater use of local, national and international case studies will enhance students' understanding of business life and develop their business acumen.

In lessons that had a book-keeping focus the teaching methodologies used were good. A good sequential approach was used with teachers ensuring that each step was understood by students before moving on to new learning. The teachers' presentation of material was good and this was

mirrored in students' presentation of work in account books. Teachers visually checked on students' progress and tendered individual support and good advice in a calm and affirming manner.

In some lessons good questioning technique was used. A mix of global and targeted questioning was used to initiate and maintain class discussion and to check on students' attainment and progression in subject matter. As a means of increasing students' understanding, motivation and attainment, higher-order questioning should be used more frequently in all lessons, and should be targeted at students of higher ability.

As mentioned above students not teachers are classroom based and this militates against the provision of a print-rich environment and the development of subject specialist rooms. Nevertheless there was no evidence of any business related resources in classrooms or within the school environs except for the library. It is recommended that a print-rich environment be developed to stimulate students' interest in business subjects and to enhance their opportunities for learning. The development of project work, especially in TY classes, could yield student-generated posters for use in classrooms.

During the course of the inspection no ICT, over head projectors (OHP), TV or other media were used as teaching aids. The judicious use of these teachings aids has the potential to enhance teaching, address various student learning styles, generate enthusiasm and build students' knowledge and awareness of the business environment that they live in. While there is no stationary ICT in classrooms, it is advisable to incorporate the use of ICT and multi media in the delivery of all business subjects. Senior management has provided OHP and multimedia equipment in different sections of the school so it can be shared between classrooms. More use should be made of this equipment. Available ICT resources should be fully utilised and ICT research and projects should be included in the range of student assignments.

Classroom management was good. Seating arrangements are conducive to active methodologies and support teacher movement through the classroom to give individual assistance and guidance to students. There was an atmosphere of mutual respect and rapport in lessons visited. Class sizes were generally small and this facilitates student participation.

ASSESSMENT

There was no whole-school homework policy operating in the school. The subject department has developed its own individual practice in relation to homework and assessment. In most lessons homework was assigned and its purpose was to reinforce learning. Correction of homework was by means of oral answers from teacher and students, and corrected solutions on the board. In some lessons it was noted that some homework assignments are evaluated outside of the classroom. This is good practice especially at senior level as it facilitates the noting of evaluative comments on students' work. In each lesson observed a sample of copies was inspected. It was found that most assignments were marked with a cursory tick. In some instances, notably at senior cycle, a small amount of evaluative comment was made. It is advisable that Assessment for Learning (AfL) techniques be expanded and used more frequently within the business subject department. The website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, www.ncca.ie, provides information on AfL that may be helpful to the business subject department

An analysis of a sample of homework journals from each lesson revealed that not all students were recording their homework. In some senior-cycle lessons especially, a significant number of

students did not have journals in class. Students in the school have four fifteen-minute periods of tutor contact time a week and some of this time should be devoted to ensuring that all students have journals in class and that homework is recorded therein.

On inspection of students' copybooks and account books, most were found to be neat and labelled. Some students' folders were well maintained so that handouts and additional print resources were stored safely, and this good practice should be more widely followed.

Students are formally assessed twice a year and informally after the completion of a topic. Good practice was observed in the use of evaluative comment. This good practice should be expanded within the subject department. Teachers in some lessons employed a very good revision technique where students had to complete a series of questions pertaining to a particular topic and use this as a means of revision. Good practice was observed in students' business folders. The use of outcome verbs in examination type question was highlighted with good explanations on the type of information that was required in students' answers. Teachers maintain records of students' test results, which help in monitoring students' attainment in subjects. Students' progress and outcomes in tests are communicated via twice-yearly written reports to parents. Each year group has a parent-teacher meeting which facilitates discussion on students' progress in the subject.

Outcomes in certificate examinations are reviewed by management and are communicated to the board of management. It is advisable that the business subject department also review these outcomes as it will assist its own self-evaluation practice.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Teachers are skilled specialists with good subject knowledge and business life experiences.
- The development of 'Moodle' in the business department is laudable and the teachers' commitment to the development of the facility is to be highly commended.
- Individual lesson preparation and planning was good in most cases.
- In lessons that had a book-keeping focus, a good sequential approach was used with teachers ensuring that each step was understood by students.
- Classroom management and atmosphere was good, with seating arrangements that were conducive to active methodologies and supported teacher movement through the classroom.

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

- As the uptake of Business Studies is currently well below the national norm an analysis and review of factors influencing subject choice of first-year students should be conducted by senior management and the business subject department and thereon a strategy be put in place to increase uptake rates in Business Studies.
- It is recommended that the business subject department formally appoint a subject co-ordinator and that this position rotate among the subject teachers in order to build capacity within the business subject department.

- It is strongly recommended that a coherent developmental plan be put in place for the teaching and learning of all business subjects in the school. The approach to planning should be a collaborative one with a strong focus on teaching and learning practices.
- It is recommended that teachers use more active and engaging methodologies especially in TY classes. There should be more frequent use of higher order questioning techniques, AfL and ICT in teaching practices.
- It is recommended that a print-rich environment be developed and that more use be made of teaching aids.

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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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

Both management and the business subject department have taken on board your concern regarding the uptake of business studies. I have been told that this situation arose following a junior cycle subject review which resulted in business studies becoming an optional subject. The conducting of a very successful campaign to promote and encourage a greater uptake of science was also a contributory factor.

The promotion of business studies, as a subject, is on the School Development Planning agenda for the current school year as is the promotion of Sancta Maria College.

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 business subject department has formally appointed a subject co-ordinator and the position will rotate among the subject teachers.

The department are committed to putting a coherent developmental plan in place. A team approach will be adopted and teaching and learning practices will be the primary focus. Time has been allocated during the month of December to allow this process to begin.

Teachers have taken on board the importance of employing more active teaching methodologies, higher order questioning techniques and AfL and they will be facilitated by management in becoming adept in their more widespread use.

The provision of a projector and computer in some classrooms under the ICT Infrastructure Grant Scheme will allow greater ease of access to the interactive resources available for business subjects.

Classrooms at Sancta Maria College are now teacher based and this allows for greater use of teaching aids, business resources and business related posters and visuals. A designated area has been identified for business related resources and teachers are committed to building on the supply of resources already available.

Problems relating to acquisition of, and use of, the school journal have been addressed with students.