

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Business Subjects  
REPORT**

**Tullow Community School  
Tullow, County Carlow  
Roll number: 91356F**

**Date of inspection: 14 May 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**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Tullow Community School. 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 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 evaluation, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix to this report.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

Tullow Community School currently offers the Junior Certificate and Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JSCP) in junior cycle and in senior cycle the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the established Leaving Certificate. A sixth year group is currently completing the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (LCA) but it, along with the Transition Year programme (TY), was not offered to the present fifth year cohort. The school has a well-established Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) course: "Advanced Computer & Business Training Course". This Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) accredited course can be taken at level 5 and 6. Business teachers in the school are involved in the delivery of the course. The PLC did not form part of this evaluation.

Business Studies is an optional subject on the junior cycle curriculum. Currently, Business Studies is offered to prospective first-year students on an option band that contains Art and Technical Graphics. The uptake rate in Business Studies is well below the national norm and thus provides a low base for selection of business subjects at senior cycle. It is recommended that an analysis and review of factors influencing subject choice of incoming first years be conducted by senior management and the business subjects department. Following an analysis of this review, a strategy should be put in place to increase the uptake rate in Business Studies. As part of this review, the provision of a taster programme for incoming first years should be considered.

Students are offered Accounting and Business in the Leaving Certificate from pre-set option bands. Most Business Studies students continue with business education in the senior cycle and choose one or both of the business subjects offered on the curriculum. However, it was noted that in the current fifth and sixth year relatively few males are taking business subjects, and this may also merit investigation. Students have the opportunity to avail of the LCVP. However, no business teacher is currently employed in its delivery, although the Enterprise module has business education at its core.

The time allocated to teaching of business subjects is satisfactory. However, Business Studies in junior cycle is offered in an option band wherein the other subjects require double periods. It was noted that some of the current junior cycle class groups had different teachers in first, second and third year. This is not good practice and it advisable that occurrences such as this be minimised where possible. While there was concurrent timetabling for second year students, effective use was not made of this good provision as one second year class had four students while the other class had twenty-nine students. No satisfactory explanation for this situation was offered.

The business subjects department does not have an annual budget but can request resources on a needs basis. As teachers are classroom based there is potential for the development of specialist business classrooms. These rooms are located in the same general area in the school which could facilitate sharing of resources. While there were some displays of commercial, student and teacher-generated posters in classrooms, there is considerable scope to develop these rooms as business resource classrooms. The display of students' project work and research would immediately enhance the classroom environment.

While there is no fixed information and communication technology (ICT) equipment or data projector in any of the classrooms where business education is being provided, all classrooms are broadband enabled, and a portable data projector is available for use by business teachers in their classrooms. Teachers can also book class groups into the computer room when it is available.

All teachers of business subjects are subject specialists with up-to-date knowledge of their subject and relevant topical issues. Teachers from the business subjects department have attended Business Studies Teacher Association of Ireland (BSTAI) meetings and conferences.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The business subjects department meets formally once a year and informally as the need arises to discuss issues pertaining to the running of the department. Brief records of the formal meetings are kept. According to the 2008 and 2009 minutes, the main issues for discussion pertained to the timetable provisions for business subjects, textbook choice and requests for resources. Co-ordination of the department's activities has been the responsibility of one of the teachers for a number of years. It would be prudent to rotate the post of co-ordinator among the business teachers as this would promote the building of capacity, the development of leadership skills and expertise within the business subject department.

The subject department planning folder contained a handwritten subject plan for 2008/9. A review of the curriculum scheme of work for Business Studies revealed that the aim is to have covered the syllabus by the end of second year so that third year is devoted to revision. This is a reductive approach to the teaching of Business Studies and does not allow students to experience the syllabus as a three-year course. The aims and objectives set out in the syllabus should determine the range and sequence of the work covered so that students attain the desired skills and concepts.

Teachers in the business subject department have outlined a common programme of work for each year in the subject plan in line with good practice. However, during the course of the evaluation it was clear that teachers worked independently and followed individual plans of work. In a second-year class group visited, students were working from past examination papers and had been doing so for the previous five months. A quarter of this class had ordinary level papers and the rest were working from higher level papers. The differentiation of ability levels at this

early stage in the junior cycle is not good practice and is not consistent with practices outlined in the existing business subjects department plan. The other second year group will not work from past examination papers until late in third year, a much sounder approach. The combined number in these class groups was thirty-three. There is a distinct possibility that these classes may be merged as happened with the present third-year class. Should this happen both groups will have received very different learning experiences. The implementation of an agreed year plan would avoid this undesirable situation and ensure that students receive a similar teaching and learning experience at the various stages of their business education.

The subject department should note that a subject plan is not intended to be prescriptive but to provide a coherent plan for the provision of business education, thus ensuring that all students experience a quality education that enhances student learning. It is therefore strongly recommended that an agreed subject plan be designed collaboratively and implemented across the department. This planning work should result in a coherent developmental plan for the teaching and learning of all business subjects and modules in the school. The plan should incorporate the learning outcomes, intended modes of homework, assessment tools, the resources available and range of methodologies that can be used for each curriculum topic. There are resources available that may assist in this planning process on the school Development Planning Initiative website (SDPI) at [www.sdpi.ie](http://www.sdpi.ie).

Individual planning and lesson preparation by teachers is good. All materials such as handouts were prepared in advance of class. It was commendable that some business teachers had their own comprehensive subject folders that contained detailed teacher lessons plans and typed lesson notes available for student use.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

As part of the evaluation five lessons, including four double lessons, were observed. A class group for each year of junior cycle and fifth year Accounting and Business classes were visited. All class groups were of mixed ability. In the majority of lessons visited there was scope for improvement in teaching and learning, and a number of areas merited concern, although some good practice was also noted.

The teaching methodologies observed during the course of the evaluation were mainly traditional and teacher-led and this was evidenced in discussions with students and from inspection of students' journals and copybooks. It is recommended that teachers use more active and co-operative methodologies so as to engage and enthuse all students in the learning process. This is particularly pertinent as business education in the school is taught in mostly double periods. As a result a blend of appropriate traditional and active methodologies is required to engage the learner. The website of the Business Teachers Association of Ireland (BSTAI) [www.bstai.ie](http://www.bstai.ie) and the Second level Support Service website [www.slss.ie](http://www.slss.ie) contain presentations and resources that may assist in accessing information on suitable methodologies.

In the majority of the lessons visited the pace was satisfactory for most ability groupings. Each lesson observed had a clear structure. Roll call and a checking of homework opened each lesson. This was followed by the introduction of lesson material and assigning of homework based on the learning outcomes of lesson. In one lesson the teacher gave a brief outline of the intended learning outcomes. This was good practice as it sought to engage the students in their learning, and it should be extended in all lessons; ideally the learning outcomes should be in a written format and remain visible throughout the lesson.

In most of the lessons observed there was a predominance of book-keeping based topics. In some of these lessons there was good integration between book-keeping concepts and the theory elements of the syllabus. This approach is admirable, but was underused. A sequential approach was adopted by all teachers and this enabled students to become familiar with concepts and practice. Teachers gave individual support and guidance to students when required in an affirming manner. However, in the majority of lessons there was very little active student involvement.

A mix of global and targeted questioning was employed in most lessons to initiate and maintain class discussion and to check on students' understanding of subject matter. However, in the majority of lessons there was a predominance of lower-order questioning. In some lessons where students were questioned by the inspector on different aspects of the learning outcomes of the lesson, students were unable to demonstrate their learning or reasoning. This occurred despite the fact that in half of the lessons visited students were not learning new material but revising topics. Students appeared to have learnt the mechanics of a topic without real understanding of it or its application in the world of business. As a means of increasing students' understanding, motivation and attainment, teachers should increase the use of higher-order questioning that is targeted at students of higher ability and should involve students in their own learning using active and co-operative strategies.

In a lesson observed at junior cycle there was very good use and expansion of students' knowledge and experiences in a class discussion that enhanced and developed learning in the classroom. This approach was clearly favoured by students. In the same lesson there were also good teacher references to local and national enterprises in the class discussion, which helped to deepen business acumen. This good practice has its place as an effective methodology and should be extended within the subject department. However, in this particular lesson the class discussion took up almost all of the double time period and it did not allow the students to experience all the intended learning outcomes of the lesson. It is advisable that in double periods a variety and balance of methodologies be used.

In a lesson where students were preparing to sit state examinations within a few weeks, very good advice on exam technique was given by the teacher. Modelling of answers by the teacher was very good and students were encouraged to label their answers and be neat in their work. This particular class group was an amalgamation of two second-year groups who also had experience of three different teachers up to second year. It was praiseworthy that the teacher sought to show students several different ways of calculating a percentage mindful that the students may have learned a range of different techniques. The teacher successfully differentiated teaching to address the different ability levels in the classroom.

Where teaching aids such as handouts and posters were used they were effective in progressing learning as was the judicious use of overhead projectors in some lessons. However, during the course of the evaluation no ICT or multimedia were used in any lesson. There are specific ICT objectives on the Business Studies syllabus and the delivery of all business subjects is suited to the use of ICT to access case studies and other resources. As already noted, there is some access to ICT in the school and this should be fully utilised, as should the incorporation of ICT research and projects as homework assignments. It is recommended to incorporate the use of ICT and multi media into the delivery of all business education.

Seating arrangements in classrooms are conducive to active methodologies such as group, pair and role play and there is scope to incorporate these as part of the learning experience in the

classroom. The layout of the classrooms also supported teacher movement as they monitored and assisted students in their learning.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The subject department follows the school's assessment policy and in doing so administers regular informal class tests and formal tests twice a year. Samples of some senior cycle assessment tests were made available to the inspector. They were well designed and contained a good spread of short and long questions which allowed for the development of higher-order skills. Teachers maintain records of students' test results. Students' outcomes in tests and progress are communicated via a written twice-yearly report to parents. Each year group has a parent-teacher meeting which facilitates discussion on students' progress in the subject.

In all lessons observed homework was assigned to students. However, homework practices were not consistent, as evidenced from a sample of homework journals from each lesson. In some lessons, particularly in junior cycle, students' homework often consisted of "revise notes" and in some lessons no homework was assigned. As students in junior cycle have only two contact lesson periods, they should receive an appropriate quantity of good calibre homework in each lesson so as to maximise the learning objectives of lessons.

Homework from previous lessons was corrected by oral answers by teacher or student and written solutions were displayed on the board. There was some evidence of cursory ticks in students' copybooks. In all the copybooks that were viewed there were no evaluative comments. In this context, it is recommended that the subject department review its homework policy so that all students receive a similar allocation of homework within the business department. It is advisable to include Assessment for Learning (AfL) techniques for use in the business subjects department as this will enhance the students' learning experience. 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 to the business subjects department.

There was divergence in the maintenance of copybooks by students. While there were some very good exhibits, in some instances neatness, layout, headings and labelling required attention. As presentation skills are important in business, students should be instructed accordingly and encouraged to aim for excellence.

Student outcomes in state examinations are analysed by the principal and compared to national norms. It is advisable that this analysis be communicated to the business subjects department for further analysis. Taking contextual factors into account, this analysis should be part of the annual review of the work of the business subjects department and help to inform future planning practices. A further analysis of students taking higher and ordinary level within each cohort also needs to be conducted with a view to maximising the numbers taking higher level in certificate examinations.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school provides a range of programmes for its students.
- Teachers are classroom based thus providing a good opportunity to have *de facto* business specialist rooms.

- There were some good instances of teaching observed which included good linkage to everyday events, good examination advice and good approaches in the teaching of book-keeping.
- All business teachers are subject specialists and have up-to-date in their knowledge of their subject and relevant topical issues.

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

- An analysis and review of factors influencing subject choice of incoming first years should be conducted by senior management and the business subjects department and a strategy put in place to increase uptake rates of Business Studies.
- A coherent developmental plan should be put in place for the teaching and learning of all business subjects and modules in the school. The planning approach should be one that informs and reflects on teaching and learning practices and strengthens and develops collaboration in the business subject department.
- In all lessons teachers should use more active and co-operative methodologies, higher-order questioning, ICT and multimedia, so as to engage all students in the learning process.
- The business subjects department should review its homework policy to ensure that students receive high-calibre homework and that the use of Assessment for Learning techniques is expanded within the business department.

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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**Appendix**

**School response to the report**

**Submitted by the Board of Management**

**Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report**

The Board of Management welcomes the report and is addressing the issues raised.