

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT**

**Newbridge College
Newbridge, County Kildare
Roll number: 61680T**

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**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN BUSINESS SUBJECTS

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Newbridge College 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Newbridge College has comprehensive provision of business subjects within the school's curriculum. In addition to junior cycle Business Studies, all three business options at senior cycle are available to students. The subjects are optional and uptake in them is consistently strong across both junior and senior cycle. Of particular merit is the level of uptake of Economics at senior cycle. A business module, which is heavily weighted towards enterprise activity, is included within the Transition Year (TY) programme.

The time allocation to the subjects meets the requirements both at junior and senior cycle, and management support for the subjects in terms of provision of additional resources is very good. There is a range of experience and length of teaching service among the team, with some teachers having given significant service to the school and its students. Assignment to teaching class groups and subjects is relatively static and appears to be based on a number of criteria including subject specialisms and length of teaching service in the school.

The teachers of Business Studies in the school have been actively involved in the local branch of the Business Studies Teachers Association of Ireland (BSTAI). Much of the team's continuing professional development (CPD) has been attained through their association with the activities of the branch. Among some of the team there is a perception that CPD needs to focus mainly on subject knowledge. There is need to explore other aspects of CPD that focus on methodologies and teaching strategies that would support the very good practice that was seen in many of the lessons observed during the evaluation. Within the subject team there is considerable expertise and skill in the areas of special educational needs (SEN), learner-focused teaching methodologies and the use of information and communication technology (ICT) as a teaching and learning tool. This provides an excellent opportunity for school-led CPD or improved collegial interaction in these areas.

While there were some excellent examples during the inspection of effective use of ICT both as a teaching and as a learning tool, its use was primarily as an administration tool rather than as a

support to student learning. There is need to fully exploit the potential provided by the range of in-class ICT supports provided by school management.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject department meetings are held biannually and the co-ordinator holds the post as part of the school's post of responsibility structure. A review of the minutes of the subject department meetings indicates that the duties of the co-ordinator are largely administrative. The co-ordinator should take a greater role in directing subject development and change. The direction of subject department meetings should shift and centre on discussion and sharing of best practice in relation to teaching and learning.

The subject plan requires development. There is no overall plan but rather each subject has produced its individual document. The current format of these individual plans is content-focused and reflects a diary or record of what is being done rather than a plan for the delivery of the syllabus. Overall, the individual plans are too reliant on the syllabus documents for aims and objectives. They have not been linked to the school's mission statement nor do they reflect an overarching view of the role of the subjects within the school curriculum. The plans should be discussed among the team regularly as part of the subject department meetings, even if in sub-groups. The range of experience and skills among the team provides an ideal opportunity to explore developments, and to share the very good practice that exists at school level as regards teaching methodologies and assessment practice.

In Business Studies at junior cycle, it is clear that a core group of teachers has worked collectively to agree the format of the existing plan. The schemes of work for the subject are agreed and designed according to best practice in the subject, with early introduction of bookkeeping outcomes. A first-year programme to be delivered in two periods has been agreed. However, it is not being adhered to by all the team, as there is evidence that suggests some of these outcomes are repeated at the start of second year. The agreed programme needs to be implemented across the team. A key strategy in ensuring the common delivery of the agreed learning outcomes consistently across all classes would be the introduction of common assessments in each of the year groups, starting with first-year groups and moving through the cycles. It is recommended that the subject department plan for the introduction of common assessments within the subjects at each cycle.

A module descriptor that focuses on enterprise activity has been completed for the TY business programme. While the module descriptor provides a brief indication of content, outcomes, methodologies and resources to be used, it should be strengthened to include reporting systems for students to record the completion of outcomes at key stages of the enterprise activities, for example, feasibility studies.

The development of the subject plan and detailed schemes of work for each subject would provide for continuity, agreement on effective teaching and learning strategies, and consistency in approach. It would also provide a useful resource for induction and mentoring of new teachers. When developing the plan, the team should include appropriate methodologies for mixed-ability classroom settings, including those appropriate to meeting the needs of less able students. This is addressed in some of the existing plans and there are some excellent in-class strategies being used by some teachers that could be shared among the team.

Some teachers of Business Studies have completed individual schemes of work that provide detail as to lesson outcomes, methodologies and resources. Pooling this information will provide a useful base from which to develop the subject plans and schemes of work.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning was generally very good and there were some examples of exceptionally good teaching observed. In a small number of the lessons observed, the teaching was poor.

In the majority of lessons class routines were well established and there was an appropriate mix of activities to maintain students' attention. Classes are organised on a mixed-ability basis and among the team many of the teachers demonstrated significant capacity to manage class groups in this setting. In many of the junior cycle lessons observed, very good teaching approaches that reflected students' learning styles were evident. Where best practice was observed, this included pair work, small group work, whole-class activity and the use of extension activities for differentiation. There was also significant evidence in many of the lessons that materials had been customised to accommodate the range of ability levels within the group.

The visual presentation of material by the teachers was consistently strong and of a very high standard. This high standard was mirrored in the students' presentation of work. In the majority of lessons good practice was evident in relation to sharing lesson outcomes, and reviewing and summarising lesson content. This approach should be adopted by all teachers, and lessons should be structured so that lesson content and assessment modes are matched to the lesson objective.

Students' behaviour during the evaluation was very good, with established class routines in nearly all lessons observed. Teachers' use of subject-specific terminology was very good and there were many examples of reinforcement of business subject principles throughout lessons. In a small number of lessons, whole-class teaching predominated. For such classes, there is need to improve the focus on providing small group, pair, co-operative and individual learning opportunities.

In the small number of lessons where the teaching showed scope for development, greater attention should be paid to the pace of lessons and to ensuring that the agreed schemes of work are followed. This will ensure consistency in the attainment of learning outcomes within year groups. In these instances, greater attention should also be paid to the balance of activities between teacher-led inputs and opportunities for students to actively engage with the lesson content. Assessment for Learning (AfL) techniques should also be incorporated. Homework should be regularly assigned, and homework outcomes should be shared with students and reviewed during the lesson to enable them to engage actively with the exercise.

There were some excellent examples of teachers monitoring students' progress during lessons and revising the pace and sequencing of the lesson to ensure that the lesson outcomes were achieved. It was also evident that there is a lot of sharing of resources among the team, but this tended to be informal rather than systematic. Storing the additional resources in electronic format will allow material to be manipulated, updated and shared more easily. The approach of the majority of teachers of the subject to the use of support notes is good. In junior cycle the use of transcribed notes is minimised and students' learning is supported through the use of graphic organisers and other visual stimuli, including mind maps.

In most of the senior cycle business lessons observed, the use of support notes was minimised and the students were actively engaged with the lesson activity. Rooms are well set out, despite the limitations on space in older classrooms. Many of the business base rooms have print rich environments that strengthen students' engagement with the wider business environment. The availability of ICT is good but its use to support teaching and learning is limited. Where ICT was used, it was used well and interactively. For example, in the TY lesson observed the emphasis on market research using new technology and on-line trading was good.

In assessing how students demonstrated learning in the subjects, many positive examples were observed. In the majority of accounting lessons, very good practice existed in promoting co-operative learning among the students, guided by the teacher, who provided individual and small group support. In most senior cycle Business and Economics lessons observed, it was evident that the teacher's approach to lesson planning was flexible enough to allow for reflection of topical and current business trends. There were excellent examples of how this was managed in some lessons, and the opportunity lost in others. In lessons where students had the opportunity to develop their applied business skills, their understanding of how theory related to their own situation and the wider business environment was very good.

ASSESSMENT

There is a straightforward, well structured whole-school homework policy that gives indicative times and suggested formats for homework, as well as reporting structures and obligations on each of the partners, including parents. Compliance with the execution of the policy is high among the teachers of Business Studies, but there needs to be consistent application by all teachers of the agreed homework policy. Where best practice was evident student work was annotated and reviewed with evaluative comment and there was a good mix of homework modes and activities.

Practice with respect to the promotion of AfL within assessment strategies was mixed. In some lessons the focus was mainly on summative rather than formative assessment strategies. Yet in other lessons AfL strategies predominated and were successfully integrated into the teaching approaches used, including appropriate questioning techniques, differentiation and reinforcement of learning outcomes. There was also some good practice with respect to the use of question banks in senior cycle subjects where students were allowed to set their own pace for completion of the work. In a small number of lessons observed there was too much focus on summative strategies without the support of appropriate teaching strategies.

Examination outcomes are good in comparison with the national norms, but should be considered in the context of the student intake and the additional learning supports available to students. There is a strong focus on examination practice with up to three mock examinations administered to Leaving Certificate examination class groups. Frequently, summative assessment instruments used in lessons are modelled on those used in the state examinations. Consideration should be given to the balance of formal assessments used with examination year groups, especially in light of existing continuous assessment practice.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Timetable provision for the subjects is good.
- There is consistency of provision in the subject from junior to senior cycle options with high participation rates in the senior cycle options.
- Resources, including ICT provision, are good.
- The TY module is weighted towards enterprise.
- Classroom interactions between students and teachers were positive.
- There were some excellent examples observed of supportive learning environments where teaching is learner focused and cognisant of students' abilities and range of learning styles.
- In most of the lessons observed, teachers endeavoured to provide support to individual students either by structuring pair or group work or by ensuring that the lesson plan included time for this activity.
- Many of the business base rooms have print-rich environments that strengthen students' engagement with the wider business environment.
- There is a straightforward, well-structured whole-school homework policy that gives indicative times and suggested format for homework as well as reporting structures and obligations on each of the partners.

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

- Greater use should be made of ICT as a teaching tool and for maintaining and sharing subject resources.
- Subject planning structures should be revised and an overall plan developed that includes updated individual subject plans which detail schemes of work, resources, teaching and assessment strategies.
- Common assessment instruments should be used with junior cycle Business Studies class groups, initially with first-year groups, to ensure common delivery of the agreed learning outcomes.
- In the majority of lessons good practice exists in relation to sharing, reviewing and summarising lesson outcomes to guide student learning. This approach should be adopted by all teachers, and lessons should be structured so that lesson content and assessment modes are matched to the lesson objective.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.