An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Business Subjects
REPORT

Grennan College
Thomastown, County Kilkenny
Roll number: 70640I

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AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION 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 Grennan College, conducted 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 one day 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

In Grennan College, business education is part of each of the school's curriculum programmes. Business Studies is offered at junior cycle and the optional Transition Year (TY) programme includes a business module. At senior cycle, Business is offered to Leaving Certificate (established) students, as is the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) which is delivered by business teachers. Grennan College offers Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses, some with business education content. PLC provision was not included in this evaluation.

Business Studies is an optional subject at junior cycle. First-year students are offered an eight-week taster programme of the optional subjects at junior cycle. This is good practice as it provides students with an opportunity to make an informed subject choice guided by practical subject experience. At senior cycle Business is offered on two of the subject choice option bands. There is good uptake of Business, as students avail of the opportunity to build on their good experience of Business Studies in the junior cycle.

Time allocation for the teaching of business subjects is satisfactory. At junior cycle Business Studies is timetabled for one double period and two single periods. In TY Business is timetabled for three single periods, and at senior cycle Business has a double and three single periods. Teachers in the business subject department all experience teaching in senior and junior cycles. This is good practice.

Business education is taught in a mixed-ability setting in the school. In lessons observed teachers successfully differentiated their teaching so that all students engaged in the learning process. A learning-support team operates in the school; business teachers liaise with this team to access support for any additional needs their students may require.

Business teachers are classroom based. The classrooms are located close to each other and this facilitates the development of specialist business classrooms and the sharing of resources. Resources available for the teaching of business subjects are good. The business subject department is not allocated an annual budget. Business teachers make individual requests to

senior management for resources that they may need, and their requests are usually met with a positive response.
Business classrooms have computers and internet access, overhead projectors (OHP), television and audio equipment, and one of the business classrooms has a mounted data projector (DP). There are shelved areas in the business classrooms where business related resources can be stored and easily accessed. In each of the business classrooms notice boards were used well. They displayed current and relevant business-related articles from newspapers. There were displays of commercially produced and student-generated posters in the classrooms. Of particular merit were the student-generated posters, which were colourful, informative and included charts that displayed step-by-step instructions on procedures such as balancing an account and completing a household budget.

Access to information and communications technology (ICT) is good in the school. Business teachers and their students have access to the computer room when it is available. Most class groups are timetabled for an Information Technology (IT) class, and business students can on occasions use this time to access websites that are specific to attainment of business knowledge. There is good collaboration between the IT teacher and business teachers in the use of ICT facilities to access business related information and resources.

All teachers in the business department are subject specialists with up-to-date knowledge of their subjects. Senior management facilitates attendance at in-service courses when they are provided. Teachers have attended LCVP and enterprise education in-service. It was evident from the observation of lessons and examination of planning documentation that teachers have used the expertise and skills gained from these in-service events in planning and delivering business education.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Senior management is commended for the allocation of planning time every term to the business department, for subject planning and discussion of issues that pertain to the running of the department. This ensures regular evaluation of activities within the business department. A business subjects co-ordinator is in place, who is responsible for convening meetings and overseeing subject planning. The minutes of meetings indicate that they follow an agreed agenda and that there is an evaluation of previously set targets and setting of new targets at each meeting. The minutes of the meetings are typed and filed for ease of reference, and this is good practice. The department also meets in an informal manner on a needs basis. It is evident from subject planning documentation and observation of lessons that a co-operative working relationship exists in the business department.

Subject plans are in place for all of the business subjects taught in the school. These plans are comprehensive as they encompass most of the elements of good planning as defined by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). The plans include details on how students can access business subjects and levels, class settings, cross curriculum links, planning for students with special educational needs, and effective teaching methodologies. Also documented in the plan is the range and variety of resources available to the department including the availability and use of ICT. The yearly curriculum schemes of work articulate the topics to be taught to each year group. Aligned to each topic are the procedures for class-work and homework. The procedures for assessment, examinations, record keeping and reporting are also highlighted in the plan. To build on this good planning practice, it is recommended that the addition of learning

outcomes, active methodologies and resources used for each curriculum topic be included in subject plans.

The curriculum plan for the TY business module is in keeping with the aims and ethos of the TY programme. The module gives a business perspective to students new to business while building and developing business expertise in students who studied Business Studies at junior cycle. Some of the topics included in the TY plan are enterprise and entrepreneurship, consumer education, household management, the world of work and the economy we live in.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In the lessons observed, teachers' planning and preparation was of a high standard. Each lesson had a coherent structure with aims and objectives outlined at the outset. Homework assigned from previous lessons was corrected. All lessons observed incorporated prior learning experiences and homework was assigned that served to reinforce learning. Lessons were at a pace that suited the mixed-ability setting. Overall the standard of teaching and learning was good, especially where active and experiential learning approaches were noted. The methods used to support teaching and learning included teacher-led discussion and instruction, student discourse, note-taking, ICT and graphic organisers. Teachers used a calm, conversational and discursive approach to impart knowledge and engage the students in the learning process.

The high level of student motivation and engagement observed in some lessons was often a direct result of effective active learning methods, such as the compilation of a business plan booklet and the creation of a student-generated mind map on business planning. These and other active learning approaches should be documented in the business department plan and used with all year groups. It was reported that some pair and group work takes place in first year of junior cycle. However, in the majority of lessons observed the methods used were traditional. While these methods were effective, they may not always suit the range of learning styles in a classroom. It is recommended therefore that teachers employ more active and co-operative learning methods in all lessons in junior and senior cycle. This will ensure that the different learning styles of students are addressed. The web sites of the Business Studies Teachers Association of Ireland (BSTAI at www.bstai.ie) and the Professional Development Service for Teachers (www.slss.ie) contain presentations that may assist in the sourcing of suitable active methods.

Teachers skilfully linked business theory with topical real-life economic practices and events. Students' folders and copybooks contained business-related word searches and business-related newspaper articles that assisted in the development of business acumen It was evident from their interactions with teachers and the inspector that students had good business knowledge and understanding. Students were proficient in applying this knowledge and understanding to everyday business situations. In some lessons observed ICT was successfully incorporated into teaching and learning in the classroom: for example, a PowerPoint presentation was used to display the aims of the lesson and definitions of business terms. Nevertheless, there is scope to extend the use of ICT in the classroom by employing it as a medium to bring real-life business news and case studies into the classroom.

Teacher questioning was very effective and was used successfully to differentiate learning targets. In all lessons observed, a range of global, targeted, higher-order and lower-order questions were used. Open questioning that enabled students to interpret questions and to discuss a range of solutions was also observed. Good practice was noted in a lesson where students had to employ

higher-order thinking to speculate and hypothesise on profitability trends in a business. Students' answering was positively affirmed in all lessons observed.

Classroom management was in all cases very good. Relationships between students and teachers were cordial and respectful in all lessons visited. Teachers and students worked collaboratively as a team and where teachers gave directions such as "pens down" or "time up", these were acted on immediately. In certificate examination classes, teachers gave good advice to students on examination requirements and effective techniques

Seating arrangements in classrooms allow active methodologies such as group work to take place. Teachers moved easily around classrooms when checking students' homework and giving support and guidance to students. The business classrooms were bright, well maintained and print rich, and contributed to the positive learning environment.

ASSESSMENT

The business subject department have an agreed practice on assessment and homework. In each lesson observed, students were assigned homework that reinforced lesson content. Teachers adopted the good practice of explaining the content of the homework and stating the required elements to be included in their answers. Homework from previous lessons was corrected by oral answers by teacher or student and written solutions on the chalkboard. In some lessons teachers checked that every student had attempted homework. Teachers might consider the use of an OHP or DP to display prepared solutions for book-keeping and examination questions as this leads to greater efficiencies in lesson time.

On inspection of a sample of homework copybooks and examination papers, it was found that most students were completing assigned homework. However, neatness, layout, headings and labelling required attention in some instances. As presentation skills are important in business it is recommended that the subject department devise strategies to improve students' presentation of work.

Teachers administer regular assessments; in one class students have a fortnightly assessment. The design of these assignments is good; they are corrected using marking schemes which mirror those in the certificate examinations. Evaluative comments are noted on student assignments, and this practice is commendable. Teachers maintain good records of students' attainment in assessments. Formal school assessments are held twice a year. The results are communicated to parents in a written report. The parent teacher meeting provides an opportunity to discuss students' academic progression and attainment in business.

Student outcomes in certificate examinations are very good. Results in certificate examinations are analysed by the principal who communicates the outcomes of this analysis to the board of management. These are also given to the business subject department for their own analysis.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Student access to the subject is good; sampling allows students to make an informed subject choice.

- Students' progression rates from junior cycle Business Studies to Business at senior cycle are good.
- Business teachers and senior management have provided a good working business environment for students.
- There is a good collaborative working spirit in the business department and this is facilitated by regular subject meetings.
- Teachers planned, prepared and taught lessons to a high standard.
- Teachers skilfully linked business theory with current, topical real life economic practices and events, thus facilitating students to develop their business skills.
- Relationships between students and teachers were cordial and respectful in all lessons; students were positively affirmed in all their interactions in class.
- Student outcomes in state examinations are very good.

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

- Subject plans should be further developed to include, for each curriculum topic: the specific learning outcomes, the range of teaching and learning methodologies to be deployed and the resources to be utilised to support teaching and learning.
- More use should be made of active and co-operative learning methodologies at junior and senior cycle to ensure that the different learning styles of students are addressed
- The subject department should devise strategies to improve students' presentation of work.
- Teachers might consider the use of an OHP or DP to display solutions for book-keeping and examination questions, to create more class time for active methodologies.

Post-evaluation meeting was 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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