

# IMPROVING Business-Related Subjects

in Post-Primary Schools

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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -  
Promoting Improvement*



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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A number of quantitative terms are used in the report. In percentages, the terms correspond as follows:-

More than 90%	-	almost/nearly all
75%-90%	-	most
50%-74%	-	a majority
30%-49%	-	a significant minority
10%-29%	-	a minority
Less than 10%	-	very few/a small number.

## INTRODUCTION

The findings in this paper are based on inspections of and visits to business studies departments in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland during the period 1996-2000.

### **1. Strengths**

- 1.1 Business-related subjects, particularly General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) business studies, are a popular choice at Key Stage 4 (KS4) in nearly all post primary schools. A small number of schools provides the part one General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) in business as an alternative to the GCSE course and nearly all offer the course at intermediate level. The post-16 provision of business-related courses has expanded in recent years, with considerable growth in the number of pupils taking General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced level business studies and GNVQ business at intermediate and advanced levels.
- 1.2 In most schools, business-related subjects sit within a broad and balanced school curriculum with an adequate time allocation to meet the Programme of Study or the examination syllabuses. Most schools providing advanced GNVQ courses in business supplement the 12 unit award with a good range of additional units in business.

- 1.3 The departmental planning in a majority of schools reflects appropriately whole-school priorities, including the promotion of literacy and numeracy, and effective classroom management.
- 1.4 In most classes, there are good relationships between teachers and pupils; the teachers in nearly all departments work well together.
- 1.5 The quality of teaching and learning in most classes has more strengths than weaknesses, and in a significant minority of classes, it has significant strengths. Typically, whole-class teaching with question and answer exercises is the dominant teaching method. In some cases, this results in very good learning experiences for the pupils; these classes are characterised by skilful and knowledgeable exposition, enthusiasm for the subject, reference to contemporary practice in business and the pupils' personal experiences, and full participation by the pupils which is achieved through effective questioning. The quality of the pupils' learning experiences, and the standards of work are good in those classes where whole-class teaching is supported by a range of activities which are well planned and challenging, and include group and paired work, role play and case studies.
- 1.6 Nearly half of the schools have developed effective links with local and regional businesses who, for example, provide good resource materials and opportunities for visiting speakers to contribute to the teaching and learning.
- 1.7 Satisfactory progress has been made in the use of information and communications technology (ICT) to support the teaching and learning in most business-related subjects. Pupils and teachers, for example, make extensive use of the internet as a source of information.
- 1.8 Teacher assessment in most schools is well organised. Work is set frequently and marked quickly. The written feedback, in most instances, provides pupils with sufficient guidance on how to improve their work.
- 1.9 The standard of the pupils' work at KS4 and post-16 ranges from satisfactory to excellent, though it is mostly good. The majority of pupils can work independently and participate readily in class and group discussions. In a minority of schools, presentations of group work are regular features of the work, providing good opportunities for pupils to gain self-confidence and to improve their oral skills. Most pupils have a satisfactory knowledge and understanding of many of the important business, economic and accounting concepts.
- 1.10 Almost all teachers are well-qualified subject specialists who have continued to develop and update their knowledge and skills.

- 1.11 Accommodation for business studies is generally good. Several schools have re-designed their classrooms to include open access to ICT facilities which are well utilised by the pupils.

## **2. Areas for Improvement**

- 2.1 While schemes of work in most cases are well written and effectively structured, insufficient attention is given to desired learning outcomes ie what the pupils should know, understand or be able to do at the end of each lesson or group of lessons, or by the end of the term or the year. In addition, few schools plan effectively for the full range of ability within the class to ensure that all pupils experience challenge and success in their learning.
- 2.2 In a minority of classes, teaching is less effective; the work is poorly planned and organised, and as a consequence, much of the pupils' learning experiences are dull and routine. The main weaknesses include over-reliance on whole-class exposition and direct transcription of information, insufficient opportunities for the pupils to engage in classroom discussions, and excessive use of undemanding worksheet activities. In office applications, the range of learning experiences in most of the classes is too limited; many of the learning tasks are repetitive and the pupils spend excessive periods of time completing past examination papers.
- 2.3 While good use is made of ICT in GCSE business studies and GNVQ courses, much of the work is confined to meeting coursework requirements. The use of ICT in teaching and learning needs to be developed further: pupils have too few opportunities, for example, to use CD-ROMs to reinforce and apply their learning of important concepts in business and economics. In a minority of cases, the pupils are given insufficient guidance on how to process and summarise resource information from the internet before it is included in their work.
- 2.4 In a significant minority of schools, the use of business education links is underdeveloped, and at best, is confined to infrequent visits to local firms.
- 2.5 Few teachers have recent industrial experience to support the teaching of GCSE office applications and GNVQ courses.

## **3. Priorities for Action**

Given the areas of weakness above, and to promote further improvements in the teaching of business related subjects, teachers need to:

- 3.1 plan for the learning needs of all pupils, giving more attention to developing teaching strategies that cater for the full ability range of the pupils;

- 3.2 ensure that the planning of lessons is based on clear learning objectives reflecting what the pupils should be able to know, understand and do at the end of a teaching session;
- 3.3 adopt a wider range of teaching approaches, including making better use of ICT in teaching and learning;
- 3.4 develop and enhance business education links.

## CONCLUSION

Schools and the Inspectorate recognise the importance of self-evaluation as a basis for improvement and development. It is intended that this publication, and the publication 'Evaluating Business Studies', will support business studies teachers and departments in their evaluation and improvement of their teaching and of the pupils' learning and standards of achievement.

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