



# Ofsted subject conference report: business education

Developing more effective teaching and learning in business education

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## Synopsis

The conference, hosted by Ofsted, took the form of a seminar for 25 business educators, including advanced skills teachers, lead practitioners from specialist business and enterprise schools, initial teacher training providers and representatives from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), The Economics and Business Association (EBEA) and Ofsted. The seminar sought to build on the work of the QCA 'Futures' project by considering how teaching and learning could be enhanced to meet the demands of the business curriculum in the twenty-first century. The two key themes were: (a) the relationship between the curriculum and teaching and learning; (b) how teaching can be made more interesting and exciting to motivate the learner, while still retaining the rigour of the subject.

## Summaries of seminar sessions

### The current state of play in business education

#### **David Butler, HMI, Ofsted Specialist Adviser for Business and Enterprise Education**

Despite substantial improvements over the past 10 years, business education remains in the middle of subjects in terms of the quality of teaching. The overwhelming majority of teaching is competent but too often it fails to really inspire and excite the learner. Why is this, given that the subject has so much going for it? There are currently unprecedented opportunities for the development of business education for all students at Key Stage 4, but the patchy nature of professional development and the lack of involvement of specialist teachers in areas of the curriculum such as work-related learning and citizenship education pose real threats to its successful implementation.

### Using descriptions of variations in learning outcomes to plan teaching

#### **Professor Peter Davies, University of Staffordshire**

The notion of 'threshold concepts' was explored as a way of evaluating students' understanding and this could be used this to inform teaching. Some work has been undertaken on identifying threshold concepts in economics but very little has been done in business courses. (Workshop groups later in the seminar considered how threshold concepts might be applied to business courses.)

### Using ICT to enhance teaching and learning

#### **Andrew Ashwin, University of Bristol, Biz/ed Website Content Developer**

The session outlined the scope of the Biz/ed website and then illustrated through case studies how it could be used to enhance and enliven teaching and learning. This was followed by a more general discussion on the use of ICT in business education.

## **'Not just Cadburys' – making effective use of business links**

**James Byng, AST Hamstead Hall School**

Links with businesses are a vital part of making business education 'real' to students but there are often practical difficulties to overcome. The session explored ways of developing links with businesses and how they can be used most effectively.

### **Meeting the Minister**

**The Rt. Hon. Jacqui Smith MP, Minister of State for Schools and 14–19 Learners**

The Minister emphasised the important role business education has to play in the curriculum, the valuable contribution it could make to developing literacy and numeracy and its potential for engaging sometimes disaffected students. She saw specialist business teachers as vital to the development of enterprise education and financial capability. The Minister, a former economics and business teacher, took part in a question and answer session on current issues in education.

### **Developing enterprise education as part of the vocational curriculum**

**Charlotte Davies, EBEA Development Officer**

The session examined developments in the vocational curriculum and the place of enterprise education in it. Enterprise education should be seen as an integral part of all vocational courses. The majority of post-16 students are likely to be taking at least one vocational course in the future and this has important implications for the development of enterprise education, which is currently focused on Key Stage 4.

### **'The tree that grows questions': towards an organic model of business understanding**

**Stephen Barnes, Freelance Education Consultant**

The session proposed a model for business courses that is intellectually coherent and based on inquiry-based learning. Teaching and learning needs to empower students by provoking them into asking questions and giving them the analytical 'toolkit' to evaluate responses.

### **Developing approaches to differentiation**

**Hala Seliet, AST The Sandon School**

A lack of differentiation is a common weakness in business lessons. A definition of differentiation was first explored and then applied to two contrasting activities to illustrate different levels of responses by outcome and task. Reference was made to the DfES Standards Unit resources on differentiated teaching for post-compulsory business education.

## Outcomes from discussion groups

There was general agreement that the following are key to improving teaching:

- a reduction in the content of examination courses to allow time for more innovative teaching and an exploration of issues in greater depth
- the need to re-define a coherent core for business education, built around threshold concepts and incorporating enterprise capability
- the need to move away from a managerial approach to business education
- assessment that encourages active and inquiry-based learning, and coursework based on readily accessible information and evidence
- better specialist professional development to maintain up-to-date subject knowledge, share good practice and develop subject specific pedagogy
- time to review, try out and develop teaching and learning resources
- the involvement of specialist teachers in the development of enterprise education, financial capability, and education and business understanding (EBU) for all students
- exploiting the full use of ICT, for example to develop inquiry-based learning, modelling, simulation and the presentation of ideas
- support to develop and make more effective use of links with business.

## Next steps

- Details of the sessions, including lesson ideas and outcomes of discussions will be made available to delegates and a wider audience on request.
- Delegates will disseminate seminar findings through their own networks.
- A review document on teaching and learning, based on the seminar and evidence from inspections, is attached (Appendix 1).

## Further information

Further information on the seminar, including details of the sessions, outcomes from discussion groups and lesson ideas contributed by delegates, is available from: [gary.linin@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:gary.linin@ofsted.gov.uk)

## Appendix 1

### Getting the 'buzz' into business education: ideas on making teaching and learning more exciting and effective

#### Background

Evidence from Ofsted inspections shows there has been substantial improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in business education in the past 10 years. The overwhelming majority of teaching is competent and it is very good in a quarter of schools. However, much teaching remains rather dull and lacking in real 'buzz' and excitement. Students generally enjoy their business lessons but rarely rate them as the best, and business education teaching continues to be classified around the middle of subjects in terms of inspection grades in both colleges and schools. This is disappointing, given that business education has much going for it: students see it as relevant, there are many excellent resources, and the subject lends itself to 'active' learning and the use of modern technologies.

It was against this background that Ofsted hosted a seminar in July 2005 for leading business education practitioners to identify the key factors preventing more exciting and effective teaching and to consider ways of overcoming them. The seminar built on work undertaken by the QCA 'Futures' project, which considered the type of business curriculum and assessment regime needed for the twenty-first century.

#### What are the barriers to more exciting teaching and learning?

The seminar identified a considerable number of factors getting in the way of more exciting teaching and learning, but five emerged as being particularly important:

- an overloaded and outdated curriculum
- an assessment system which gives too much emphasis to knowledge and too little to skills and processes
- the difficulties of developing effective links with businesses
- the lack of subject-specific professional development
- a failure to make the most of available resources, including new technologies.

The first of these was considered key and this paper draws on the findings from the seminar and evidence from Ofsted inspections to consider what sort of business education curriculum is required for the future and what principles should underpin a fundamental review of the subject.

#### How can we improve the business curriculum?

Ofsted and the QCA define business education as the context within which young people develop knowledge and reasoning in relation to:

- the nature and role of enterprising and managerial behaviour
- the economic environment in which businesses operate

- organisations' contribution to the creation of wealth and the satisfaction of human needs and wants.

Business education also develops personal and social skills and qualities that are necessary for living and working in a contemporary, industrial environment.

Business education is taught through examination courses such as economics and business studies. Aspects of economic and business understanding (EBU), enterprise education and financial capability are also included in work-related learning and citizenship education, both of which are statutory requirements for all students at Key Stage 4. Business education contributes to young people achieving economic well-being, a key outcome of *Every Child Matters*.

There are no statutory programmes of study in business. The QCA approves qualifications submitted by awarding bodies against subject criteria, and has issued non-statutory guidance on the concepts of EBU and financial capability that should be taught as part of work-related learning.

The size and content of the business curriculum have an obvious and direct bearing on teaching and learning. Delegates at the seminar felt strongly that examination courses are often overloaded with too much content and that some of the content is unnecessary or out of date. They argued that having so much content means less time for more imaginative approaches to teaching and learning aimed at developing students' skills. They also questioned the need for having 'academic' and 'applied' courses, given that much of the content was identical, with the mode of assessment being the main difference between the courses. Evidence from Ofsted inspections also indicates that students opt for business courses largely on the basis of the type of assessment involved, rather than the content or style of learning. The majority of delegates supported a radical re-think of the nature and content of the subject, particularly at Key Stage 4, rather than just a 'tinkering at the edges'.

### **What principles should underpin a fundamental review of the subject?**

First and foremost, courses need to empower students to be able to understand, interpret and evaluate the economic and business environment in which they live. Students who have completed a business course should be empowered to analyse and interpret the economic and business world differently from when they began the course. For example, they should be able to:

- challenge statements and develop arguments that are rooted in conceptual understanding and supported by evidence
- distinguish fact from assumption
- evaluate the impact of decisions on different stakeholders
- investigate and suggest solutions to economic and business problems
- understand the interconnectivity of change in organisations.

Second, there needs to be clarity of learning outcomes which define business education and give it coherence. Delegates at the seminar saw considerable value in identifying a set of 'threshold' concepts as a way of defining learning

outcomes. Substantial work has already taken place on developing such a set of concepts in economics but very little has been done in business studies. Delegates suggested a range of possibilities, for example, one approach identified risk, value and opportunity cost as the essential threshold concepts, while another identified markets, competition, value added and trade as key. Clearly, much more work needs to be undertaken, but the notion of identifying a small number of threshold concepts appears to offer a way forward to reducing content and providing greater curriculum coherence. It also offers possibilities for assessing students' levels of understanding more effectively.

Third, content in examination courses needs to be kept to a minimum to allow more time for developing students' skills and a deeper understanding of issues. Business education is not constrained by statutory programmes of study. Schools and colleges do not normally require students to have studied GCSE business in order to proceed to advanced level business and universities do not make advanced level business a requirement for economics and business degrees. So considerable flexibility is possible, both in terms of the quantity and content of the business curriculum.

Fourth, the business curriculum should be designed to encourage students' interest and to actively engage them in learning. It needs to provide opportunities for students to make use of the business activities they are already engaged in such as work experience, part-time employment, enterprise schemes and links with industry. Inspection evidence shows that these activities are often seen as being separate from business courses and teachers cite difficulties in making them an integral part of current examination specifications.

Fifth, the business curriculum needs to take account of government initiatives to promote the development of business education for all students at Key Stage 4. Economic and industrial understanding is an important element within work-related learning which is statutory at Key Stage 4 for all students. All schools are receiving additional funding for three years from September 2005 to support enterprise education at Key Stage 4. The DfES views enterprise education as consisting of enterprise capability supported by better financial capability and EBU. Citizenship education is also a statutory requirement at Key Stage 4 and this too includes elements of EBU.

It is, of course, up to schools how they deliver EBU and enterprise and financial capability to all students. Most are likely to adopt a cross-curricular approach, even though there is much evidence showing that it is very difficult to implement effectively. Some schools, particularly specialist business and enterprise schools, have decided that the best approach is to provide a specific business course for all students. It therefore makes sense to have congruence between the economic and business education that needs to be taught to all students and the core of examination courses in business. However, this may well require some revision of the economic and business content in work-related learning and citizenship, as early inspection evidence suggests that what is currently proposed is overly ambitious in the time available.



## **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that the starting point to getting more exciting and effective teaching in business education is to get the curriculum right. It has therefore focused on this as the most urgent need and suggests the key principles which should guide a fundamental review of the subject. However, this is only a starting point. Getting the curriculum right is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for more effective teaching and learning. Better assessment, professional development, business links and use of resources are also vital, and it is intended that future discussion papers will address these issues.