



Business and social studies subjects at A level

Report title:

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Report details

This report is in response to a request for advice in the Minister for Education's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2018-2019. It reports on standards, provision and leadership of business and social studies General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Levels (A levels) in school sixth forms and further education colleges.

Summary of main findings.

The report provides an overview of the challenges and good practice for standards, provision and leadership in supporting learners studying particular subject areas at A level in school sixth forms and further education colleges.

Standards

Many learners begin to study business and social studies subjects for the first time when they enter sixth form or college. Many make strong progress in their studies and a few make exceptional progress, compared with their starting points. A minority of learners do not progress from AS to complete A level studies or do not achieve as well as they could. A far greater proportion of girls than boys choose to study law, psychology or sociology while a much greater proportion of boys than girls choose to study business studies or economics. Girls outperform boys in business and social studies subjects across most high grade indicators at A and AS level (grades A*-C and A-C respectively).

Most learners enjoy A level study and many show a keen interest in current affairs, especially in subjects such as economics and government and politics. A minority have aspirations to study business or social studies subjects at higher education level. Most learners show positive attitudes to learning and a strong sense of pride in their work. Many manage their time efficiently and organise their work files effectively. A minority of learners are over-reliant on support and materials provided by their teachers and do not undertake enough independent research. Most learners have a clear understanding of their own strengths and what they need to do to improve. In a few cases, learners do not build on teacher feedback to improve their work.

Many learners make strong progress in developing their writing skills, especially through essay and research work, although a few produce work that is insufficiently evaluative. Many learners demonstrate strong numeracy skills in business, economics and psychology, but a few are not confident in handling and analysing data. Many learners do not develop and use their information and communication technology skills well enough to enhance their work, such as by using statistical packages to analyse and present data in research projects. Many learners develop strong problem-solving skills and apply these confidently in new contexts.

Many learners develop specific skills in business and social studies courses. These include applying theoretical models and concepts to the real-world, and interpreting and evaluating information from complex sources, including the media and academic journals. They develop the ability to present an argument and discuss the merits of different perspectives. Learners recognise that, in business and social studies, there is often no single correct answer, and that they need to choose from a range of valid interpretations and justify their choice by putting forward a reasoned line of argument.

Provision

A few schools and colleges offer the full range of business and social studies subjects, while many offer some but not all of these subjects. In general, the breadth of curriculum offer tends to relate directly to the number of learners. A few providers offer one or more subjects in partnership with other centres. Nearly all centres ensure that subjects continue from AS to A level, although class sizes can vary widely.

Most schools and colleges enable learners to gain only a limited insight into the nature of social science subjects before they make their A level choices. A few learners also do not receive enough guidance on choosing subject combinations that are appropriate to their career and progression aspirations.

Most teachers establish good working relationships with learners and set clear expectations of them. Most teachers have strong subject knowledge and up-to-date understanding of external assessment requirements. They plan their teaching well to ensure that learners are prepared effectively for external examinations.

The most effective teachers convey a genuine passion for their subject and inspire their learners using well-thought-out teaching strategies. Many discuss topical issues to encourage learners to apply theories and concepts to real-world situations. They also emphasise the value and importance of wider reading in their subjects.

Leadership

The arrangements for the leadership of business and social studies A levels vary greatly between individual schools and colleges. Management structures based around academic subject disciplines are most common in schools, while many colleges are organised around broad vocational areas. A few colleges with large numbers of A level learners have established dedicated sixth-form centres, usually with leadership arrangements more akin to those in secondary schools.

Many schools and colleges undertake course or subject cluster reviews. However, in a minority of providers, these processes are not robust enough at identifying key strengths and areas for improvement in specific subjects.

Many schools and colleges tend to focus primarily on A level pass rates or successful completion data and give insufficient consideration to grade attainment or distance travelled. A minority also do not take enough account of AS level performance when evaluating subject performance. Many centres stipulate minimum entry grades in GCSE English or mathematics for learners to

study some subjects, such as economics or psychology. This practice can skew the attainment data and so it is important to consider value-added data when comparing results across providers.

A few schools and colleges work in partnership with other providers to extend the range of subject choices. But in many of these partnerships, arrangements for quality assurance are not robust enough to identify accurately areas for improvement.

Most teachers identify support available through the WJEC examination board, as the main source of professional learning for these teaching subjects, either through subject networks or linked to roles as A level examiners. Regional consortia provide little subject-based support relating to these subjects. The majority of teachers in business and social studies subjects are the only A level teacher of the subject in their school or college. As well as restricting opportunities for collaborative working this can lead to difficulties in covering classes when a member of staff is absent, especially if this is for an extended period of time.

The recent reform of A and AS levels has led to a change in awarding organisation for business and social studies subjects. Delays in the availability of materials and resources for some subjects have added to the challenges faced by learners and teachers. The availability of Welsh-medium learning resources including textbooks remains a particular challenge.

Recommendations for Schools and colleges:

Recommendation 1

Schools and further education colleges should:
Strengthen the opportunities for learners to find out more about new subject options such as A level business and social studies subjects before they finalise their subject choices.

Recommendation 2

Schools and further education colleges should:
Work collaboratively with other schools and colleges to share learning resources, particularly Welsh-medium resources, and to increase professional learning opportunities for teachers of A level business and social studies subjects.

Recommendation 3

Schools and further education colleges should:
Strengthen monitoring and evaluation processes for A level business and social studies subjects to ensure that teachers and leaders are able to identify strengths and areas for improvement in relation to teaching, learning and assessment.

Welsh Government response to recommendations 1-3:

Welsh Government supports the recommendations and will raise them in our engagement with schools and further education colleges, along with local authorities, regional consortia and other stakeholders.

The Welsh Government is in the process of enabling staff working in further education colleges to use Hwb for sharing digital learning resources, and for professional collaboration and networking. It was agreed to postpone the rollout of Hwb accounts for FE staff due to Covid-19, but a revised timetable will be discussed with further education institutions soon.

Recommendations for local authorities and regional consortia:

Recommendation 4

Local authorities and regional consortia should:
Facilitate increased professional learning opportunities for teachers of A level business and social studies subjects.

Recommendation 5

Local authorities and regional consortia should:
Support schools to evaluate the effectiveness of their A level provision and develop targeted improvement plans.

Welsh Government response to recommendations 4-5:

Welsh Government supports the recommendations.

Welsh Government funds the regional consortia to deliver professional learning and facilitate subject networks to support the delivery of A levels. Welsh Government will draw these recommendations to their attention to inform their planning.

Recommendation 6

The Welsh Government should:

Address the limited availability of A level Welsh-medium learning resources, including textbooks, in these subjects.

Welsh Government response: **Accept**

Welsh Government invests up to £1million annually on Welsh-medium resources to support the teaching and learning of qualifications. Grants have been awarded to WJEC and Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol to address the resources requirements for post 16 qualifications. Through these grants Welsh-medium versions of textbooks are being made available as well as digital resources and teacher materials on Hwb. Welsh Government will review the current provision and consult with practitioners on further requirements.

Publication details.

Publication date 4 August 2020

The report will be published on or after 4 August 2020 and may be accessed on the Estyn website.

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.



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