Examiner's Report

January 2010

GCE Applied ICT 6961 Paper 01

Using Spreadsheet Software

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Important information

This specification has been updated and ALL candidates will be assessed on the updated version from SUMMER 2010. This version which has a blue cover and has been sent out to centres, many centres have attended the free inset sessions.

Moderated Units
Assessment Issues
Candidates need to supply explicit evidence to support their achievement of the criteria in the various marking grids. It is easier to confirm marks if the evidence is easy to find and supplied in an explicit form.

Assessors must use the e-sheets as an opportunity to explain why they have awarded marks, there are two advantages to this for the centre. If the moderator can see why and where marks are awarded it is easier to agree with the centre marks, secondly if the centre marks cannot be agreed then the moderator can give better guidance to help future assessment.

A number of centres still do not meet deadlines for submitting work to the moderators; the deadlines are published in advance and must be kept unless special permission has been obtained in advance from Edexcel. Permission will only be granted in exceptional circumstances. Centres who miss the deadline risk having the results delayed or the candidates recorded as absent.

Each unit must be on a separate CD, even if sent to the same moderator. Each unit will forwarded to different principal moderators for monitoring and auditing purposes.

Unit 11: Using Spreadsheet Software (6961)

General Comments

It was disappointing to note during the January 2010 moderation window that despite all the systems in place to support centres, assessors and students, full advantage of these is not yet being taken by everyone.

The unit specification clearly defines the requirements of unit 6961. The assessment criteria indicate the primary focus of the work to be submitted and the assessment guidance documents explain how and where marks are accessible and to be awarded. Comprehensive Examiner's reports on this unit have been published many times; on each occasion the principle weaknesses in centre and/or candidate interpretation and approach to the unit have been indicated. The points in this report have all been identified previously.

It appears that some centres still fail to appreciate the main requirements of this unit. 11.1 of the course specification states "spreadsheets are used in all sorts of contexts for tasks involving the analysis and interpretation of complex numerical data, such as: modelling; statistical analysis; cost-benefit analysis; simulation; forecasting; budgeting and planning". Assessment evidence (b) states "appropriate use of functions and formulae to analyse complex data". Both of strands (b) and (c) use the phrase "technically complex spreadsheet". The design, prototyping, development and testing of such a spreadsheet is required to fulfil the requirements of this unit. If all elements of this process are completed every strand of the unit will be addressed and, by definition, a good grade secured.

Again at this moderation, some candidates had not addressed the abovementioned issue of complexity and had produced solutions that did not reflect A2 standards. These candidates were not able to access many marks in some of the strands.

It was evident from the material submitted that some centres are still taking a very structured approach to the production of the material for assessment and moderation. In some cases not only was the structure of the portfolios identical but so too were the contents, including the spreadsheet artefact. Whilst it is quite acceptable for a generic brief or scenario to be provided to all candidates, such brief should be sufficiently open ended to enable candidates to adopt an independent approach to a solution – as is required to access the higher mark bands. Candidates who have independent 'ownership' of a problem from the outset undoubtedly secure the highest marks overall.

Many centres had used the created spreadsheet solution as the project for Unit 6958. Whilst this is understandable, centres should ensure that candidates collate and provide two sets of evidence which are clearly differentiated and mapped to the individual unit requirements.

Comments on strand A – Functional Specification

The required content for the functional specification is outlined in11.2 of the specification. The more able candidates addressed this strand very well, had 'ownership' of a problem to be solved and specified measurable success criteria. The success criterion is, more often than not, the primary omission when full marks for the strand are not confirmed.

Many candidates presented generalities – and sometimes theoretical statements – rather than specifying tasks/objectives (in relation to their proposed spreadsheet solution). At this moderation window, a number of candidates relied on content from the unit 6958 proposal and scope documents to support the strand rather than producing the expected stand-alone functional specification.

The level of detail incorporated in some of the functional specifications – including screenshots from the finished product in some cases – suggests a retrospective approach and/or reverse engineering; this is not expected and restricts the marks available.

The over-reliance on generic scenarios at some centres generates functional specifications which are alike across a cohort as many candidates do little but re-write the provided material. This is not expected and restricts the marks available.

Comments on strand B – Design

Although a marked improvement in the quality of the work presented – as compared to previous series - was discernible, the design aspect of this unit was frequently poorly addressed.

At this moderation, all too often candidates presented commentaries on processes undertaken, sometimes even including screenshots from the finished product.

The aspects about which decisions are expected to be made prior to commencement of the spreadsheet product itself are listed in 11.3 of the specification and expanded in 11.4-11.9. Frequently, candidates incorporated some, or all, of these aspects in their product without acknowledging them in any design work.

As always, consideration of the aesthetics of the product along with layout and presentation was well documented. Unusually, at this moderation window, there was a considerable amount of 'research' into sponsoring organisations', corporate identity, competitors etc. Whilst interesting, this is somewhat unnecessary. Future proofing, if included, was often misunderstood and innumerable candidates failed to make any mention of validation. Prototyping, implied in many portfolios, was often not supported by the expected part-complete systems as spreadsheet files.

Comments on strand C – Fully Working Spreadsheet Solution

Although one or two were inaccessible because of formatting issues, it was good to see that the actual spreadsheet products were included in all the portfolios at this moderation window; most of these were beautifully presented.

Far fewer systems comprising embedded formulae but no data were encountered in January than previously; there were though instances where the product should clearly have been a database and created using alternative software.

There were some excellent A2 spreadsheet systems at this window incorporating a range of complex spreadsheet functions and formulae. As has been reported previously, some centres and candidates appear to be addressing the issue of complexity through the use of Visual Basic. The resultant product is often far more appropriate for Unit 6912 (Customising Applications) than this unit. Some limited use

of VB is reasonable but moderators cannot be expected to examine code to establish use of formulae.

Despite all previous Examiners' reports and individual reports to centres, it was disappointing to note a considerable number of candidates evidencing little beyond level 2 skills in relation to functions and formulae used.   2 cell formulae, If statements and vlookups are insufficient on their own in this context.

Noticeable at this window was the frequent inclusion of instructions in relation to the application software ie "how to" in one or both of the requisite guides. Many guides were presented as commentaries on the finished product rather than overviews of use / technicalities.

Although usually nicely produced and presented, innumerable User Guides did not comprehensively demonstrate the facilities of the spreadsheet system to a potential user. A recurring major omission at this moderation was the error messages generated by incorporated validations.

Some centre cohorts omitted the expected technical guide altogether which suggests a misinterpretation of the requirements.

Comments on strand D– Testing

Overall, there was a lack of direct evidence of testing at this moderation window and few high marks secured. The limitations of some of the devised systems mitigated against accessing the higher mark bands because of the lack of testing opportunities.

Still frequently presented are test plans and/or long Word tables which describe tests – but are not supported by any direct evidence using screenshots eg testing of validation using sample data. A structured and rigorous approach to testing the system - utilising normal, unacceptable, extreme and boundary data would be evident where candidates have addressed this strand well.

Some candidates do not seem to appreciate the relevance of the prototypes and prototyping process to this strand and fail to include the early spreadsheet versions and/or the feedback which informed development.

Most candidates evidenced testing functionality exclusively. There was little to suggest that how the spreadsheet fulfils the requirements of the Functional Specification was considered.

Comments on strand E – Evaluation

There were some very good evaluations presented at this moderation window with many accessing top MB2 and/or MB3.

However, a considerable number of candidates appear to struggle with this strand of the unit and produced descriptive detail of processes undertaken and problems encountered rather than evaluative content.

The best evaluations address all three aspects of the strand well and incorporate the client, end user and/or peer tester's opinions. Often, candidates addressed 1 or 2 of the strand requirements particularly well but content in respect of the other(s) was limited.

As mentioned, many centres combine undertaking this unit with unit 6958. At this moderation window there was a considerable amount of material in the evaluations which directly related to project management rather than this unit and the spreadsheet product itself.

The evaluation should relate to the initial requirements. Good evidence produced for strand (a), particularly in relation to objectives for the system, enables candidates to do this effectively.

Grade Boundary January 2010

6961	Total	A	B	C	D	E
Raw Mark	60	45	39	33	27	22
UMS	100	80	70	60	50	40