

Principal Moderator Feedback

January 2011

Applied GCE

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Information and Communication
Technology (6961)

Paper 01 - Using Spreadsheet Software

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General Comments

In the January 2011 assessment window there was some very good work submitted for this unit with sophistication and complexity seen in many of the spreadsheet products together with detailed supporting documentation. Some very high marks and grades were secured.

Notwithstanding the above, it was disappointing to note that previously reported issues are not yet being addressed by all centres. 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 herein have all been identified and well documented in earlier reports.

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.

Quality of Written Communication should be assessed in strand (e). Innumerable centres failed to mention this and some mark adjustments were necessary in light of QWC. Surprisingly often at this moderation, marks were awarded to candidates for material which was not included on the provided CDs. This adversely affects the entire cohort.

Individual reports are written for centres at the time of moderation and yet points raised, specific to those centres, seem not always to be considered or addressed. Despite all mechanisms and support systems in place some centres still fail to appreciate the main requirements of this unit; particularly in relation to the nature and content of the spreadsheet product required. Strands (b) and (c) use the phrase "technically complex spreadsheet". It appears to be this issue of complexity which remains the major stumbling block for many centres and/or candidates - and is the primary reason mark adjustments are made. Although fewer in number than at previous moderations, many candidates had not addressed the issue of complexity and had produced spreadsheet solutions that did not reflect A2 standards. Some centres still fail to recognise the impact of this lack of complexity - marks accessible to candidates, particularly in strands (b) and (c), being limited.

The design, prototyping, development and testing of a spreadsheet is required to fulfil the requirements of this unit. Assuming the issue of complexity is adequately addressed, completion and documenting of the elements of this process should secure a good grade.

Some candidates had used the created spreadsheet solution as their project for Unit 6958. Whilst this approach 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 is outlined in 11.2 of the unit specification. Many candidates addressed this strand well, and appeared to have 'ownership' of a problem to be solved. The success criterion is, more often than not, the primary omission when full marks for the strand are not confirmed.

As at previous moderation windows, some candidates still relied on content from their unit 6958 proposal and scope documents to support this strand rather than producing the expected stand-alone functional specification. Further, despite interesting and well written background information, many candidates failed to specify specific tasks/objectives in relation to their proposed spreadsheet solution.

It was disappointing to note yet again at this window the level of detail incorporated in some of the functional specifications - including design work and screenshots from the finished product. This suggests a retrospective approach and/or reverse engineering which is not expected and restricts the marks available.

Comments on strand (b) - Design

There was some outstanding design work submitted at this moderation window which is very encouraging. Undoubtedly, this is the strand where the largest mark adjustments are often made as some centre assessors appear to award a mark for strand (b) which merely reflects or replicates that awarded for the product. It is possible to submit good design work but a weak product, and vice versa.

The aspects about which decisions are expected to be made, ideally prior to commencement of the spreadsheet product itself, are listed in 11.3 of the specification and expanded in 11.4-11.9. Documenting decisions made and other pertinent issues is the evidence required for this strand.

Although there were fewer commentaries on the finished product and/or processes undertaken than previously, many candidates still failed to consider little more than the user interface, aesthetics, layout and presentation in relation to the design of their product. Frequently candidates failed to identify or explain what they planned to do in relation to input, output, the incorporation of complex functions and formulae, future proofing and validation.

Future proofing appears problematic and is often misunderstood with some candidates considering updates to software particularly significant.

A particular weakness at this moderation at all levels was validation which was poorly documented and evidenced. Innumerable candidates failed to make any mention of validation - in strands (b), (c) or (d) - despite its incorporation in the system developed. Prototyping, implied in many portfolios, was often not supported by the expected part-complete systems as spreadsheet files and end user feedback to inform development was seldom incorporated. In some cases, material submitted as prototyping was detail of implementation.

Comments on strand c - Fully Working Spreadsheet Solution

As required, the actual spreadsheet products were included in all the portfolios at this moderation window although sometimes location of the necessary password proved problematic.

The principal requirement of the strand, to produce a “technically complex working spreadsheet”, is being evidenced much more frequently and often very well although this issue remains the main reason for mark adjustments on the unit overall. As already mentioned, there were some outstanding products incorporating the requisite complex functions and formulae at this moderation window.

There were few examples of addressing the issue of complexity through the use of Visual Basic which is encouraging because the resultant product is often far more appropriate for Unit 6912 (Customising Applications) than this unit - and moderators cannot be expected to examine code to establish use of formulae. Disappointingly, text based systems, where the product should clearly have been a database and created using alternative software, were regularly presented at this moderation.

Notwithstanding the above, despite the various reports previously mentioned, it was disappointing to note the significant number of candidates who are still devising spreadsheet products which evidence little beyond level 2 skills in relation to functions and formulae used. As has regularly been reported, 2 cell formulae, If statements and vlookups are insufficient on their own in this context.

Submitted by all candidates the user and, separate, technical guides were not always comprehensive and/or fit for purpose with validation and associated error messages often the major omission from the user guides. Frequently, the technical guides included instructions in relation to the application software ie “how to” which is not necessary and renders the document not fit for purpose.

Comments on strand d - Testing

In the main, this strand was reasonably well evidenced at this window although some candidates still do not appear to appreciate the relevance of the prototypes and end user involvement.

There were far few instances of testing at a superficial level ie of hyperlinks and macro buttons rather than the spreadsheet itself than is often the case.

Screenshots showing direct evidence of tests having been undertaken was the norm although rigorous testing of validation was sporadic and not all candidates took a structured approach to each test utilising a range of data.

As well as functionality, and ‘end user’ testing, to address the strand well candidates should evidence that the spreadsheet meets the requirements of the Functional Specification.

Comments on strand e - Evaluation

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

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

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

The best evaluations address all three aspects of the strand well, relate to the initial requirements and incorporate the client, end user and/or peer tester's opinions. Good evidence produced for strand (a), particularly in relation to objectives for the system, enables candidates to do this effectively.

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