Principal Moderator Feedback

Summer 2013

GCE Applied ICT (6961) Paper 01 - Using Spreadsheet Software

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General Comments

The upward trend in performance on this unit continued in this series. The full range of marks was seen with a good number of candidates gaining high marks. There were some outstanding spreadsheet products demonstrating application of a wide range of software skills. It was good to note the far fewer instances of non-completion of the unit and/or failure to secure a pass grade than has been the case in some recent series.

The requirements of 6961 are clearly defined in the specification with assessment criteria and guidance indicating the focus of the work required and accessibility of marks. It is pleasing to report that large numbers of centres are now correctly interpreting the criteria and applying the guidance well to ensure accurate assessment. There are though still instances of high and generous marks being awarded to weak and incomplete material/documentation. This is particularly noticeable on strand (b).

At the time of moderation individual reports are written for centres outlining weaknesses in their assessment and/or interpretation and approach to the unit. It is disappointing to note recurring issues where centres have not addressed the reported points.

Many candidates use the created spreadsheet solution as their project for Unit 6958. This approach is understandable, but candidates should be aware of the requirement to collate and provide two sets of evidence which are clearly differentiated and mapped to the individual unit requirements. There were a considerable number of examples of misplaced 6958 documentation being included in the 6961 portfolios; and some candidates relying entirely on the definition of scope to address strand (a) of this unit.

To access 6961 the design, prototyping, development and testing of a spreadsheet is required. Providing a range of software facilities beyond numerical operators and simple formulae is incorporated in the product, completion and documenting of the elements of this process should secure a good grade.

Comments on strand (a) – Functional Specification

Four aspects are expected to be considered in the functional specification, as outlined in 11.2 of the unit requirements. Many candidates address this strand reasonably well and secure MB2. With a few exceptions centre assessment of the strand was accurate. The success criteria and whether or not they are measurable is, more often than not, the reason when full marks for the strand are not confirmed.

A considerable number of the functional specifications moderated indicated that candidates had 'ownership' of a problem to be solved. This approach reflects best practice and affords the opportunity to devise, design and create a unique product. It was pleasing to note that very few generic and often restrictive assignment briefs had been used.

There were examples of mis-placed and irrelevant material in the functional specifications. In many cases, the use of screen shots from the completed product being included indicates that some candidates take an approach that is not suitable at this level of qualification. As mentioned, some candidates still rely on content from unit 6958 to support this strand rather than producing the expected stand-alone document.

There were still instances where, once the tasks for the spreadsheet were identified, it should have been readily apparent that spreadsheet software was not appropriate.

Comments on strand (b) – Design

There was a considerable amount of design work in many portfolios at this series; this has not always been the case in the past. It is pleasing to report that the quality of the work being undertaken for this strand is improving.

Notwithstanding the above, this strand the most leniently assessed. Assessors must differentiate between the initial design work and the content/incorporated facilities of the product itself.

Itemised in 11.3 of the specification and expanded in 11.4-11.9 are the various aspects about which decisions are expected to be made prior to the creation of the spreadsheet product itself. Documenting decisions made including prototypes, feedback from the 'sponsor', their involvement in informing development and other pertinent issues is the evidence required for this strand. The available choices in respect of the means of documenting the required evidence are numerous.

As mentioned, the quality of some of the material submitted for this strand was higher than encountered in previous sessions. That said there are still large numbers of candidates who present little more than commentaries on the finished product and/or implementation processes. Others concentrate on the design of the user interface, aesthetics, layout and presentation of their product, but fail to consider what they plan to do in relation to input, output, the incorporation of complex functions and formulae, future proofing and validation. Good prototyping and end user feedback informing

development was rarely seen and future proofing remained problematic and frequently misunderstood.

Comments on strand c – Fully Working Spreadsheet Solution

As required, the actual spreadsheet products were included in the majority of portfolios at this moderation window. An issue at this series was the inclusion of password protection on the products without the password being supplied to the moderator. This could disadvantage the candidates as access to the product is necessary for moderators to assess facilities used, functionality etc. Please note, password protection of the products is not necessary.

As mentioned in the introduction to this report, the principal requirement of the strand – a "technically complex working spreadsheet" product - is being evidenced much more frequently and often very well. That said, at this series there were instances where, although used appropriately, the range of software facilities incorporated within the products was limited. The range and effectiveness of the facilities used is the determinant of the mark band accessible.

At this series there were several centres/candidates that had chosen to develop linked, updating workbooks; others presented products with dozens of repetitive worksheets and repeated formulae. Neither of these approaches is necessary, a single workbook with macro navigation between a few worksheets will suffice.

Disappointingly, text based systems, where the product should clearly have been a database and created using alternative software, were regularly presented this series.

The majority of candidates included user guides and some technical information but not necessarily the two separate documents expected. Usually very nicely produced and presented, many of the User Guides did not fully demonstrate the facilities within the spreadsheet with validation and associated error messages usually the major omission.

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

Other than where MB3 and full marks were generously awarded, this strand was reasonably accurately assessed at this series.

It was disappointing to note the inclusion of long tables of tests, in some cases many pages long, with no supporting evidence of any actual tests having been carried out in some cohorts.

Screenshots showing direct evidence of tests having been undertaken was the norm but often candidates failed to consider more than navigation and/or macros. The documentation of a structured approach to testing each function, formulae, calculation etc together with automated processes and validation utilising a range of data was often limited.

Many candidates did not appear to appreciate the relevance of the prototypes and end user involvement in development of the product in this strand; such evidence expected to support top MB2 and above.

Comments on strand e – Evaluation

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

It is disappointing to note the considerable number of candidates who struggle with this strand and present descriptive detail of processes and implementation rather than evaluative content.

As mentioned, many centres combine undertaking this unit with unit 6958. Far fewer than at previous series there were still instances of content directly relating to project management rather than merely the spreadsheet product itself.

Grade Boundaries

Grade boundaries for this, and all other papers, can be found on the website on this link:
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