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Moderators' Report/ Principal Moderator Feedback

Summer 2016

Pearson Edexcel GCE In Applied ICT (6961) Paper 01 Using Spreadsheet Software

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General Comments

Although the full range of marks was encompassed in this series, the number of sophisticated spreadsheet products with associated qualitative documentation was disappointingly low. The range of software skills evidenced was often limited and there was little variety to many of the products within a cohort.

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 good to note that many centres are now correctly interpreting the criteria and applying the guidance well to ensure accurate assessment. However, there are still numerous instances of high and lenient marks being awarded to weak and incomplete material / documentation – this is particularly noticeable with strand (b).

Upon completion of moderation of a centre's cohort, a report is written for each centre. This identifies issues specific to their assessment of the material submitted. Whether or not due to the fact that the report does not reach the necessary individual(s), the regularity with which the points raised do not appear to be considered or fully addressed subsequently is particularly disappointing.

Pearson Edexcel provides various support systems in respect of the interpretation and completion of all units within the Applied GCE. Unfortunately, despite such facilities, the requirements of this unit, particularly in relation to the nature and content of the spreadsheet product required, are frequently not fulfilled sufficiently to access other than MB1 marks. The limited range of software facilities and particularly functions and formulae used is more often than not primary weakness in products submitted.

To access 6961, the design, prototyping, development and testing of a spreadsheet, devised to solve a perceived or real problem, is required. Each student's portfolio of work is expected to be totally unique. Some centres appeared to have taken a very structured approach to the unit and documentation. This approach often generates very similar materials and / or products and, obviously, impacts on independence of working. Although small in number, there were instances where it was apparent that students had been provided with a spreadsheet - including its data and even some formulae – and all they were required to do was develop, edit and amend it. This approach is totally unacceptable in the context of this unit and qualification.

Many students use the created spreadsheet solution as their project for Unit 6958. For centre expediency this approach is understandable but centres and students 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 of the two units. There were numerous examples of 6958 documentations being included in the 6961 portfolios; some students relying entirely on the definition of scope to address strand (a) of this unit and presenting a combined evaluation.

Comments on strand (a) – Functional Specification

The quality of the functional specifications submitted at this series was good overall with the majority of students securing MB2. Ideally, students have 'ownership' of a problem from the outset and are thus able to set the scene, describe the problem and rationale for the proposed product and identify objectives for their system.

The success criteria are, more often than not, the primary omission when full marks for the strand are not confirmed; the notion of measurable in relation to the finished product being misunderstood by the majority.

There were still instances where, once the tasks / objectives were identified, it should have been readily apparent that a spreadsheet was not the ideal approach and that the tasks required of the product were better suited to database software. Often students described their artefact as a database throughout the portfolio.

As mentioned, despite the requirement for a discrete functional specification addressing 11.2 of the specification, some students incorporated extracts from their 6958 proposal and / or scope documents.

Comments on strand (b) – Design

The quality of work for this strand is undoubtedly improving. It was good to note that this strand is now being addressed better and assessed more accurately than in the past.

Notwithstanding the above, this strand is often that which generates notable mark adjustments. Despite all previous reports some assessors still fail to differentiate between the initial design work and the content / incorporated facilities of the product itself. Students frequently present retrospective material ie commentaries on decisions made and processes undertaken evidenced with screenshots from the finished product rather than their initial ideas and plans to address the requirements / objectives for the product.

The various aspects about which decisions are expected to be made prior to commencement of the spreadsheet product are itemised in 11.3 of the specification and expanded in 11.4-11.9. Documenting initial ideas and, perhaps, subsequent changes plus 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 means of documenting the required evidence is entirely at the student's discretion.

As mentioned, the quality of much of the material submitted for this strand was an improvement on what has often been encountered. Students do however often concentrate on the layout of the user interface, aesthetics and presentation of their product at the expense of considering what they

plan to do in relation to input, output, the incorporation of functions and formulae, future proofing and validation. Good prototyping and end user feedback informing development was rarely seen and future proofing was frequently misunderstood.

Comments on strand c – Fully Working Spreadsheet Solution

The designed and devised spreadsheet product is expected to be included in the student portfolio and accessible; this was not always the case at this series. There were few products omitted but by far the biggest problem was access to the spreadsheets - password protected systems with inoperative passwords or, in many cases, passwords that could not be located at all. Obviously this makes moderation very difficult indeed as moderators are required to check functionality of the product itself. Please note, password protection of the products is not necessary.

Many students evidenced this strand well but there were innumerable 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 in this strand.

As noted at previous series, there were examples of entire centre cohorts developing linked, updating workbooks or where the products comprised dozens of repetitive worksheets and repeated formulae. Neither of these approaches is necessary, a single workbook with macro navigation between a handful of worksheets will suffice and afford the opportunity to meet the strand requirements.

The majority of students included user guides and some technical information but not necessarily the two separate documents expected. Although usually 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

Although often done well, frequently the evidence presented for this strand comprised little more than long test tables showing no more than the successful testing of macros and navigation. Screenshots showing direct evidence of tests having been undertaken were included by some students but material documenting a structured approach to testing each function, formulae, calculation etc together with automated processes and validation utilising a range of data – acceptable, unacceptable and extreme - was seldom seen.

The prototyping documented for strand (b) supports the higher mark bands of this strand, but few students documented testing against their functional spec objectives or the underpinning logic of the spreadsheet which would be expected at MB3.

Comments on strand e – Evaluation

Some good evaluations were presented at this series; the improvement in these documents is noticeable; many students 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 students to do this effectively.

A considerable number of students produced descriptive detail of decisions made and processes carried out and these were more often than not written in the first person.

Students often seem oblivious to obvious issues / shortcomings of their final spreadsheet product and fail to identify these or suggest improvements.

As mentioned many centres combine delivery of unit 6958 and 6961 which is understandable. However, these units are separately assessed and moderated and require discrete documentation. Yet again, many students presented a combined evaluation for 6958 and 6961 - which disadvantages them in respect of both units – or included material more suited to 6958 in their 6961 evaluation and vice versa.

Grade Boundaries

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