



Pearson

Examiners' Report

Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2017

Pearson Edexcel GCE Applied in Information
and Communication Technology (6961)

Using Spreadsheet Software

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Summer 2017

Publications Code 6961_01_1706_ER

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General Comments

The full range of marks was encompassed in this series and there were some very sophisticated spreadsheet products with an associated high quality and comprehensive documentation. However, the range of software skills evidenced was limited to level 2 functions and formulae and the accompanying documentation limited. Frequently, there was little variety to the products within a cohort and some centres / candidates approached the unit in terms of website functionality with baskets and checkouts supported by flowcharts and data dictionaries, this approach tended to limit opportunities in terms of functionality.

The requirements of 6961 are clearly defined in the specification with the assessment criteria and guidance indicating the focus of the work required and accessibility of marks. Whilst many centres are correctly interpreting the criteria and applying the guidance well to ensure accurate assessment, there are still numerous instances of high and generous marks being awarded to weak and incomplete material / documentation – this is particularly noticeable within 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. Centres are advised to carefully consider the points raised in previous series.

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

The design, prototyping, development and testing of a spreadsheet, devised to solve a perceived or real problem, is the requisite content for 6961. Each candidate's client, documentation and subsequent product is expected to be totally unique. Some centres take a very structured approach to the unit and documentation. This approach often generates very similar materials and / or products which impacts on independence of working.

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

Strand A – Functional specification

The quality of the functional specifications submitted at this series was good. Most of the candidates secured MB2. Ideally, candidates 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 usually the primary omission when full marks for the strand are not confirmed. The notion of measurable in relation to the objectives being misunderstood by many.

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

Strand B – Design

The quality of work for this strand fluctuated drastically; some centres are obviously au fait with the requirements but all too often the level of detail provided was insufficient for another person to produce a spreadsheet product identical to the solution presented by the candidate.

This strand is undoubtedly that which generates the most notable mark adjustments. Despite previous reports, some assessors still fail to differentiate between the initial design work and the content / incorporated facilities of the product itself. Candidates frequently present retrospective material i.e. 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 client and 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 candidate's discretion.

The quality of some of the material submitted for this strand was higher than is often encountered and deserving of the high marks awarded. However, candidates frequently concentrated on the layout of the user interface, aesthetics and presentation of their product at the expense of considering what they planned 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 often misunderstood.

Strand C – Fully working spreadsheet solution

The designed and devised spreadsheet product was included in all candidate portfolios in this series but not all were accessible. There were instances of password protected systems with inoperative passwords or, in a handful of cases, passwords that could not be located at all. This makes moderation very difficult as moderators are required to check functionality of the product itself. Please note, password protection of the products is not necessary.

Some candidates 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 in past series, there were examples of entire centre cohorts developing linked, updating workbooks or where the products comprised innumerable 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 fully meet the strand requirements.

Candidates are required to produce a user guide and some technical information – usually interpreted as a technical guide. In this series, there were many candidates

who only produced the user guide. Although these were 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, i.e. 'how to' which is not necessary and renders the document not fit for purpose. Equally, installation guides are not appropriate for this strand. A document identifying location of named ranges, details of macros, linked cells to check boxes, input / output of functions and formulae etc. to facilitate a competent software user (i.e. Excel) to maintain the system is expected.

Strand D – Testing

Overall, the material presented for this strand was far more comprehensive and appropriate than has often been the case latterly. Fewer long test tables with little or no direct evidence of any tests were encountered this series.

Screenshots showing direct evidence of tests having been undertaken were included by most of the candidates 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 in any detail. Peer and client testing was included by many and this demonstrates good practice.

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

Strand E – Evaluation

Some good evaluations were presented in this series. The improvement in these documents is noticeable with many candidates accessing the top of MB2 and / or MB3. Evaluations which achieved higher marks addressed 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.

A considerable number of candidates produced descriptive detail of decisions made and processes carried out and / or omitted one element of the expected content. Some candidates missed the obvious issues / shortcomings of their final spreadsheet product and failed 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. Some candidates presented a combined evaluation for 6958 and 6961 which disadvantaged them in respect of both units. Material more suited to 6958 in the candidate's 6961 evaluations, and vice versa, were also included.

