Principal Examiner Feedback

June 2012

Functional Skills ICT
Level 2 (FST02)

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Introduction

This was the tenth series of the Level 2 Functional Skills ICT test. Many of the issues that have been noted in previous series are still evident in responses during this series. Reports from examiners indicate that there continue to be a small number of Centres where it seems that some candidates have been poorly prepared for the test particularly for spreadsheet tasks. A pass in the test is intended to be approximately equivalent to the Grade B standard in GCSE. Responses from candidates in this examination do not always reflect this standard.

It is a requirement of this test that candidates should have access to the internet only during the first 15 minutes of the test. There continues to be evidence that the relevant staff in Centres are seemingly unaware of this stipulation and that facilities for offline email are not made available to candidates for the purpose of this test. There are some centres where the use of students' personal email accounts (e.g. Hotmail, Yahoo mail etc) is still evident. Centres need to ensure that candidates are reminded that there could be serious consequences if they are found to be breaching the code. There is also evidence from pupil responses that Centres are not setting up new accounts for each series and data files from previous series are available and that items in email clients are not cleared before the start of the examination week. Centres are also reminded that it is a requirement that separate user areas, not accessible to candidates outside their sitting of the test, should be prepared.

There is some evidence from screenshots produced during the test that candidates are using their normal desktop and documents folders. Some centres contacted Edexcel to indicate that their network systems prevented candidates from accessing required elements of the specification – in particular for this series the addition of contact details for new contacts. It is important that Centres provide the appropriate facilities for candidates to complete all tasks within the specification. The guidelines for setting up the user accounts for the test are clearly laid out in the Information for the Conduct of the Examination issued for each series. Further guidance on email and internet access is available from Edexcel if required.

It has been disappointing this series to note how many candidates did not attempt the spreadsheet task in full. It raises concerns that candidates are not being fully prepared for this task in that even where the task was attempted, candidates were not able to use the '=IF' spreadsheet function and replicate as expected. In addition, there remains considerable concern about the candidates' ability to filter data appropriately using the relevant spreadsheet tools.

There were, as usual, five tasks to be completed during the test. These were based on a scenario about a chocolate maker.

Task 1 – Internet Research
Candidates were asked to research the internet for information about the origin of the cocoa beans used to make chocolates.

Candidates generally succeeded in using a search engine to find the information in Task 1a. They were asked to take a screenshot of the search engine, clearly showing the search criteria. Many candidates seem unaware of what constitutes the search engine and failed to show the full page and often search criteria were not evidenced clearly.

Many candidates showed the resulting web pages rather than the search engine. Though not penalised in this series candidates have a tendency to write sentences in the search criteria rather than picking out the key words. Candidates should be reminded that they should check the printout to ensure that the necessary evidence is easily read. Most candidates scored marks for correctly obtaining the required information.

Candidates were asked to obtain the names of the two countries which produce the most cocoa beans. Cote D'Ivoire is generally recognised as being the largest producer. Examiners accepted either Ghana or Indonesia as the second since the second position in the list depends on the age of the information.

Areas for improvement and development:
- understanding the term "search engine"
- understanding the term "search criteria"
- producing screenshots which show the required information in a readable manner
- copying website addresses accurately and completely
- acknowledging appropriate sources of information.

Task 2 – Spreadsheet
There were 5 sub-tasks for the spreadsheet activity. Candidates were presented with a spreadsheet held data about two types of chocolate sweet.

They were first asked to format the sheet so that it was clear and easy to understand. Candidates need to be taught that this generally means ensuring that all data is visible (i.e. not truncated), using appropriate number formats (e.g. date/time or currency or number of decimal places), applying suitable font styles to make headings stand out and using appropriate borders and/or shading to make the sheet easier to read. Vertical shading of data does not often fulfil these criteria since most spreadsheets are designed for horizontal reading of the data. Many candidates scored only one or two of the three marks available with a large number of candidates failing to format the price column as currency.

The second sub-task was to sort the data into alphabetical order of ingredients. Most candidates completed this task successfully. However there were a significant number who did not sort the whole table but only the first column.

In Task 2c, candidates were asked to use an IF function to calculate the cost of the ingredients for the two type of chocolate. A surprisingly large number of candidates did not attempt to use the relatively simple IF function. Many therefore also were unable to demonstrate replication skills since they had not used appropriate formulae to calculate the values. The final part of the task was to use a formula to total the amounts. From the printouts seen many candidates seemed to have used a calculator (often with incorrect values) rather than using the spreadsheet to calculate the total.

In Task 2d, candidates were requested to filter the data to show only the rows for ingredients present in the Coffee Nut chocolate. This does not involve deleting other information or re-sorting the list.

In Task 2e, candidates were asked to produce a graph to show the costs of the ingredients present in a Coffee Nut chocolate. Many graphs were suitably presented but as has often been the case in previous series, titles and axis labels are poorly done.

Areas for improvement and development:
- formatting a spreadsheet
  - currency
  - decimal places
  - appropriate borders and shading
  - word wrapping
  - appropriate row heights and column widths
  - use of text formatting to enhance visual clarity e.g. bold, italics, font size
- using formulae
  - simple formulae using arithmetic symbols (+, -, / and *)
  - using functions e.g. SUM, IF and VLOOKUP where appropriate
  - using efficient formulae (eg using SUM for adding up a range of cells)
  - using absolute and relative cell references
- sorting and filtering
  - on one column
  - on multiple columns (secondary sorting)
  - expanding selection to include full table in a sort
  - using appropriate filters to show selected data from a table
- graphs
  - pie charts, line graphs and column or bar charts with one or more series of data
  - inserting a suitable title on the chart
  - appropriate legends
  - axes labels where relevant
- printing
  - printing in data view
  - printing in formula view
  - adding footers with candidate details
  - fitting a spreadsheet to one page
  - making sure that colour schemes used are still readable when printed in monochrome.

Task 3 – Presentation of information

Task 3 usually brings together information from the internet research and the spreadsheet tasks to produce a document aimed at a particular audience. Often the candidates will be expected to also select text and images to produce an integrated document.

In this series, candidates were asked to produce a single sided newsletter for the chocolate maker. Candidates were provided with a file which contained text which might be relevant to the document. The file also included text which was not relevant. They were provided with a set of images from which a suitable selection was expected. They were also expected to present the newsletter text in columns. Most candidates produced a document which matched most of the stated requirements. Some candidates included text and images which were not relevant.

Candidates are expected to present the information so that it is fit for purpose. This will usually involve choice of appropriate fonts and styles so that documents are consistent and show a professional looking layout. Often images and text were truncated because insufficient care had been taken in their placement and checking the layout.

As a second part of the Task 3, they were asked to create a folder for the newsletter and move the newsletter into this new folder. They are expected at this level to be able to name files and folders appropriately. Many candidates give their folders and/or files names which relate to the examination rather than the scenario. They are generally expected to maintain the concept of the scenario so folder names such as 'Exam work' are not appropriate.

Many screenshots again demonstrated poor understanding of the requirement that text should be readable so that work can be credited.

Some Centres had not prepared the facilities for the examination correctly since screenshots showed evidence of work from normal classroom activity such as folders for Year 7 and Year 8 work. This is a breach of the regulations and centres are advised that this may result in awards being withheld from candidates.

Areas for improvement and development:
- selection of appropriate software for producing an on-screen or paper-based presentation of information
- integration of information from a variety of sources including text, images, tables and graphs
- consideration of suitability in selection of text/images for an audience and purpose
- use of formatting techniques such as appropriate:
  - text enhancements – bold, italic, underline, font sizes
  - selection of font styles
  - selection of suitable font sizes for a presentation
  - hyphenation
  - columns
  - checking for consistency in font sizes and styles
- checking for truncation of text and/or images
- consideration of fitness for purpose
- consideration of audience.

Task 4 – Communication: preparing an email
Candidates were asked to prepare an email with a suitable subject and an attachment.

Several candidates also do not check that email addresses are correctly entered. Examiners continue to find that email messages are not suitable in tone or content. Often the messages are not spell-checked and grammar-checked and the tone is not suitable for a formal message. For example "Hi" and "Hey guys" were considered to be inappropriate ways to address email messages for business purposes.

As mentioned previously, some examiners report that there are still several centres where there is evidence that candidates are accessing the internet during this task and using online accounts - often these are the candidates' personal accounts. This is unacceptable and a breach of the code of practice for this examination. Candidates who access online accounts may face disqualification for these breaches. Examiners also noted that some candidates seemed to be using an existing account with several (often personal) contacts already in the address book and messages in the inbox/outbox/sent boxes.

Some examiners have reported that candidates at some centres do not appear to have access to an offline mail client and produce 'emails' in word processing software. Since these cannot provide suitable evidence of attachments, centres which do not provide the candidates with offline email clients are penalising their candidates unnecessarily.

There are ways of producing the evidence using offline account systems – for example the setting up of Outlook or Outlook Express accounts as part of the examination account used by the candidate. Centres are reminded that the accounts set up for the test should be cleared of previous contents. Further guidance is available on the Frequently Asked Questions section of the Edexcel Functional Skills website.

Areas for improvement and development:
- selection of appropriate offline email client software
- ability to display and add contacts or addresses
- careful copying of text from the question paper especially email addresses
- attachment of files to an email
- use of a suitable subject line for an email
- use of appropriate language for email messages
- legibility of screen shot evidence.

Task 5: Using ICT
Often responses to Task 5 are usually entered at the end of the Responses document used for Task 1. Many candidates print out and include multiple copies of this document. Some candidates produced 4 copies of the document – one each for Task 1a, 1b and 5a and 5b. This is unnecessary. A single completed copy is all that is required. Instructions to print at Task 1 are included in case candidates fail to complete the full examination.

In Task 5 for this series, candidates were asked about ways of organising email inboxes and what to do with a message from an unknown sender which contained an attachment. Most candidates scored well on this task. Many of those who lost marks did so because their answers were too vague or incomplete. For example "sorting alphabetically" was insufficient since it did not indicate which field would be sorted. "Do not open it" did not gain a mark in 5b since 'it' referred to the message (which was in the stem of the question) rather than the attachment.

Areas for improvement and development:
- organisation of email messages, attachments and contacts
- understanding the requirements for staying safe online.

Pass mark for FST02

Maximum mark	50
Pass mark	34
UMS	6

Note: Grade boundaries vary from year to year and from subject to subject, depending on the demands of the questions.

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