Principal Examiner Feedback

November 2009

IGCSE ICT (4385) Paper 3A & 3B

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Contents

Paper 3A and 3B, Set Tasks and Project

Projects
The November entry was relatively small compared to the May entry and it is not possible to draw any meaningful conclusions about changes in the work submitted in November compared to that submitted in May. The report on the May entry should therefore be taken as applying to the November entry as well.
The text of the May report is repeated below.

Most of the work was presented in a satisfactory manner, but the following guidelines may enable some centres to improve their candidates' marks.

- Each project should have a cover sheet, clearly labelled with a minimum of the candidate's name, candidate's number and the centre number. A completed version of the IGCSE ICT coursework cover sheet would be suitable for this purpose

- Projects should be securely bound. Spiral binding or secure stapling will usually suffice. A single treasury tag or length of string is not really sufficient as pages can easily be detached when the project is handled

- Projects should have a contents page and matching page numbers. These could be written in by hand when the project is finished. It is not compulsory but it is always useful to know where candidates think they have put the different sections of their project

- Projects should be presented in a logical order, preferably Identify, Analyse, Design, Implement and Evaluate.

It was obvious that an increasing number of candidates were submitting GCE O Level projects. There is no prohibition on this but candidates must be made aware of the differences in the specification between O Level and IGCSE. Much of the work in an O Level project is superfluous to the IGCSE requirements and therefore gains no marks. e.g. most of the systems analysis. On the other hand, the IGCSE requires much better evidence of the design and production process. An O Level project would require a substantial rewrite to gain the same degree of credit in the IGCSE. In particular, evidence of making and using advanced features of the software is essential for scoring extension marks.

It was also obvious that a number of centres had provided their candidates with a project template. This is not prohibited and the IGCSE Coursework Guide for Students could be regarded as being such a template.

Problems with templates arise in two ways:

Firstly, if the template is incomplete. This results in candidates being unable to access some parts of the mark scheme because the template that they are following does not include the relevant sections of the project.

Secondly, if the template contains too much detail. Section and subsection headings, with some guidance as to the appropriate content, will usually be acceptable. But, once centres start to give suggested wording or diagrams, markers are likely to refer the projects to be investigated for possible collusion.

Identify

Most candidates were able to identify a suitable problem, but it was clear that many of them had reverse engineered the whole project by making the application first and then arranging the other sections to fit what they had done. This nearly always results in the candidates losing marks by having weak identify, analyse and design sections.

Many candidates failed to fully identify their user. Higher band marks require identification by name, not just by the company or organisation.

User requirements or objectives were often generic and untestable. Proving that a system can find a record in 30 seconds, or that less staff are needed is very difficult to do.

Consideration of alternatives was often weak. Simply contrasting a computer based with a manual system is unlikely to gain much credit. Candidates should look at alternative computer methods and give good reasons why one method would be preferable.

Analyse

Access to higher band marks in this section is via the words 'fully explained'. Candidates should be reminded that the markers do not know them, do not know their users, have not seen the applications running and only have the written accounts to look at.

In particular, alternative outputs were rarely explored and when this was done, the alternatives proposed were often of the type, 'screen versus printout'. Alternative screen layouts, report formats or other variations on one type of output were rarely considered.

There were some good attempts at data flow diagrams, but descriptions of the collection and manipulation of the raw data were usually incomplete. Where candidates identify multiple raw data types or sources, they should try to include all of them in their write up.

Examples of raw data were very rare, word processed mock-ups are not very convincing. Security and backup were mentioned more frequently than in previous years but were rarely well explained.

Design

Candidates should go through the process of making initial designs, showing them to their user, getting some useful feedback, making the final designs. Candidates who actually did that were in a distinct minority. Far too many candidates simply reported user comment. This is a middle band marking point. With a little more effort, a signed letter or other evidence from the user would have given a higher band mark.

As with Analyse, candidates should be reminded that the markers only have the written account to look at. If the design is missing, so are the marks. Furthermore, if there is little or no design, the marks for Implement will be low, since they depend on a design being followed.
Testing was another weak area. Many candidates simply listed a set of validations. The test plan may well include such validations but it must also specifically test the objectives or user requirements given in the Identify section.

Implement

This section should be considered in three parts.

Firstly, candidates should not just present a finished product with no information about how it was made. Higher band marks are not accessible without clear evidence of a production process.

Secondly, they should clearly demonstrate that the design has been followed and the objectives met. This will be difficult if there was no design or only vague objectives.

Thirdly, the test plan needs to be followed and evidence given for the result of each test. Simply claiming that it worked is not worthy of marks.

Evaluate

The evaluations were generally weak. A lot of candidates did refer back to their original objectives and claimed to have met them but very few gave any evidence to back their assertions. A few page references would have sufficed in most cases.

Most candidates did not produce evidence of user feedback. Many had unsigned letters or reported comments but this is not enough to access the higher band marks.

Set Tasks

The following advice is repeated from the summer 2009 report and deals with presentation of the work. It is applicable to both the 2009 and future papers. Following the advice may enable some centres to reduce their workload and improve their candidates' marks.

- The Set Tasks do not need to be bound. They are best presented as loose leaf in an A4 plastic pocket or document wallet. Markers need to be able to compare pages, e.g. Design and final product. This is much easier with loose pages. If staples or other fastening methods are used, care should be taken not to obscure or damage the work.
- The Set Tasks and Projects should be submitted as two separate bundles of work. They are unlikely to be allocated to the same marker. There were several instances where centres mixed the 3A and 3B work or where a 3A project was swapped with a 3B Set Tasks. Putting a candidate's work into a single binding must be avoided as the Set Tasks will have to be removed and this may result in the work being damaged.
- All pieces of work should be clearly labelled with the candidate's name, number and task identification. The task identification becomes essential if a candidate does not complete all of the tasks as it can sometimes be hard to work out which task the candidate thought they were doing.
- Extra work must not be submitted. There are marks for sticking to the required number of pages. There are no marks for anything which has not been specifically asked for in the tasks.
- Anything that the candidate thinks is worth a mark should be annotated, explained and presented in task order. Markers do their best to find everything which is worthy of a mark but some candidates have the ability to present their work in the most obscure and muddled way possible.

All of the tasks have a design element. The correct sequence of events is design it first, make it afterwards. Doing things in reverse order often results in lower marks.

Task 1(a) The design of the boundary information boards

Most candidates who attempted to do sketches were able to produce reasonable designs. Unfortunately, a large number of candidates who tried to do their design on computer were limited by the software that they used. This often resulted in low marks as they only used the symbols available in the art package that they were using and did not attempt to show features that did not have obvious pieces of clip art to illustrate them.

Task 1(b) Making the information boards

Where there were adequate designs to follow, candidates usually scored well. Problems mainly arose from having poor designs and not taking into account all the information given in the Case Study. Candidates should also be reminded of the importance of annotation to explain changes from their designs.

Task 1(c) The web site design
Too many candidates appeared to have used a template for a web writing package and made insufficient effort to customise it for the task.

Task 1(d) Making the web site
There were numerous good examples of appropriate web pages but as with the information boards, it was clear that many candidates had not used the information given in the Case Study.

Task 1(e) Using the spreadsheet to analyse plant distribution
It was clear that some centres had given a bit too much guidance on how the processing should be done. Most errors were simple problems such as missing out the centre cell when calculating.

Task 1(f) Using the spreadsheet to analyse grass distribution

Most candidates managed to perform the calculations, but less showed the formulae, and few gave adequate annotations to explain what they had done.

Task 1(g) Pictorial representation of plant distribution
There were a lot of very good answers and ingenious methods of completing the task. Unfortunately many of these were let down by the lack of a clear explanation.

Task 2(a) Database input screens
As in previous years, too many candidates had obviously made the database first and then turned it into a design. Annotation was also missing in most cases. Far too many of the input screens were simply Access default, with little or no attempt made to do any actual design. In many such cases, the fields were either default text or no details were given. This level of work is not worthy of credit. Annotations and explanations tended to be rather sparse.

Task 2(b) Making the animals table
This was a fairly straightforward task and the great majority of candidates were able to get marks here. Candidates who lost marks did so for two reasons, having the wrong number of entries, and more frequently, having totally inappropriate animals such as large carnivores and marine creatures. These should not have been placed in a 50m by 75m area of a school's grounds.

Task 2(c) Linking the database to a web site index page
The link was supposed to use a script or macro. Some good examples were submitted but more candidates could have gained marks if they had included better, or any, annotation to explain how the link worked. Few candidates gave evidence for how the macro was activated.

Task 2(d) Linking the database to web pages
Candidates appeared not to understand the concept of thumbnails. The pictures rarely had titles or anything telling users what to do with them.

Task 2(e) Recognising which web page to open
This was supposed to use a script or macro and was designed for the more able candidates. Most candidates either did a simple repeat of 2c or used hyperlinks. Neither of these answer what they were asked to do in the task. The best answers used a 2c macro for each picture and linked them with a further macro that decided which one of them should run. In other words a multiple IF statement in the form of a macro.

Task 2(f) Implementing the method from 2e

Most candidates produced some version of their method but weak designs in 2e meant poor marks here as well. Annotations were generally poor.

Task (2g) The information sheet

As in previous years, this was a fairly simple task but too many candidates failed to realise that a straightforward mail merge approach would have been sufficient. Most candidates used a report and did not do much to customise the basic report template.

Grade Boundaries – November 2009

Option	A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	U
1 (1F, 3A & 3B)	-	-	-	49	43	37	31	25	-
2 (2H, 3A & 3B)	66	57	48	40	31	26	-	-	-