Principal Moderator Feedback

Summer 2012

Applied GCE 6961

Unit 11 – Using Spreadsheet Software

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General Comments

Although overall the upward trend reported at previous series continued, in June 2012 few sophisticated spreadsheet products coupled with detailed supporting documentation were seen.

Much of the work moderated was average or weak. Notably at this window, apparently hastily compiled documentation and incomplete portfolios were regularly presented. Notwithstanding the above, although some of the supporting material is improving – particularly the functional specifications and design work – the main reason for the innumerable low scores/grades remains the lack of complexity of the spreadsheet products coupled with over-generous centre assessment of strands (b) and (c).

Unit 6961 is a well established unit within the Applied GCE specification; the requirements are clearly defined within the assessment criteria and the guidelines indicate the basis for awarding marks. Previously published Examiner's reports have identified the main issues with work submitted and weaknesses in interpretation and/or addressing the unit; it is disappointing to have to report again that some centres are failing to consider these and implement appropriate changes in approach.

Immediately upon completion of moderation of a cohort, individual reports are written for centres identifying issues specific to their assessment of the material submitted. Disappointingly, the points raised do not always seem to be considered or fully addressed.

Various support systems are in place in respect of the interpretation and completion of all units within the Applied GCE but yet the requirements of this unit, particularly in relation to the nature and content of the spreadsheet product required, are frequently not fulfilled sufficiently to secure other than a bare pass grade for candidates.

Strands (b) and (c) use the phrase "technically complex spreadsheet". It appears to be the issue of complexity which remains the major stumbling block for many centres and/or candidates - and as mentioned is the primary reason mark adjustments are made. Many candidates in the June series did not address this issue of complexity and produced spreadsheet solutions that did not reflect A2 standards. The impact of this lack of complexity is a limitation in the marks accessible to candidates in strands (b), (c) and (d).

To access 6961 the design, prototyping, development and testing of a spreadsheet is required. Providing the issue of complexity is adequately addressed, completion and documenting of the elements of this process should secure a good grade.

Comments on strand (a) – Functional Specification

The quality of the functional specifications submitted in June 2012 was a notable improvement on previous series; the majority of candidates securing 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, 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 is misunderstood by the majority.

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.

Despite the requirement for a discrete functional specification many candidates utilised or incorporated extracts from their 6958 proposal and/or scope documents rather than addressing 11.2 separately.

Yet again, in June 2012 there were innumerable examples of extracts from the completed system within the functional spec which suggests a retrospective approach to the strand – not expected at this level of qualification.

Comments on strand (b) – Design

There was a greater quantity of design work in many portfolios at this series than has often been the case in the past but the quality is not necessarily improving.

This strand remains that which generates the largest mark adjustments as many centre assessors do not differentiate between the initial design work and the product itself, appearing to award a mark for strand (b) which merely reflects or replicates that awarded for the product. It is possible to submit good design work but a weak product, and vice versa.

11.3 – 11.9 of the unit specification details the aspects to be considered in the design of the spreadsheet product. Quite often, candidates incorporate some, if not all, of these aspects in their product without referencing them at all in their design work.

Many candidates plan little more than the user interface and associated colour schemes and font styles failing to consider likely inputs and outputs; possible functions and formulae; potential for validation or incorporation of future proofing facilities for example. Good prototyping and end user feedback informing development was rarely seen.

All too often candidates presented commentaries on what they had done rather than what they were planning to do and again there were examples of retrospective design work incorporating screen shots from the finished spreadsheets.

Comments on strand (c) – Fully Working Spreadsheet Solution

The designed and devised spreadsheet product is expected to be included in the candidate portfolio. At this window, entire centres omitted to include the product.

To access unit 6961, and particularly this strand, candidates are expected to devise and develop a "technically complex working spreadsheet". Inclusion of the product itself is necessary for moderators to assess both complexity and functionality.

Many of the spreadsheets presented in this series fulfilled the above requirement but there were disappointingly few sophisticated products seen. Logins, password protection, hidden worksheets and cell contents undoubtedly enhance the products but are not helpful to the moderation process unless access details are provided and readily apparent and the location of significant content indicated, especially formulae.

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

On individual centre reports where necessary and in all previous Examiners' reports the issue of complexity has been addressed. Unfortunately, again at this series, the majority of the mark adjustments were the result of the lack of complexity within the spreadsheets presented.

To fulfil the 6961 requirements, the spreadsheet should incorporate a range of complex functions and formulae and include the automation of processes. Clearly there remains a lack of understanding of what constitutes a complex function/formulae as large numbers of candidates included little more than level 2 functions: IF Statements, VLOOKUP's, SUM, AVERAGE and COUNT. Whilst it is reasonable to include these, 2 cell formulae and/or the functions listed are insufficient on their own to constitute complex. As mentioned, it is this issue of complexity of functions and formulae which is the determinant of marks accessible across several strands.

Notwithstanding the above, there were numerous examples of text based systems which should have been databases and high marks awarded on the basis of macros and VB forms that had been created. Macros would be expected to facilitate navigation between worksheets but moderators cannot be expected to examine code to establish any formulaic content.

Most 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 often the major omission.

Technical Guides are frequently presented as software specific "how to" documents rather than identifying "behind the scenes" aspects of the spreadsheet produced.

Comments on strand (d) – Testing

Disappointingly at this series, much of the evidence presented for this strand was little more than long test tables showing the successful testing of macros and navigation. Screenshots showing direct evidence of tests having been undertaken were included by some 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 was seldom seen.

In addition to the above, good evidence for this strand would include prototyping and client/end user involvement in development of the product. Minutes of meetings were included to support this aspect but few candidates documented testing against the objectives set in the functional spec or the underpinning logic of the spreadsheet.

Comments on strand (e) – Evaluation

The previously reported upward trend in the quality of evaluations continued at this series. There was some high quality material submitted for this strand 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.

A considerable number of candidates produced descriptive detail of decisions made and processes carried out rather than evaluative material addressing the three aspects of the strand and including third party comments/feedback. Frequently candidates appeared 'blinkered' and neither aware of nor able to identify or explain shortcomings of their final spreadsheet.

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 candidates 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.

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