Principal Examiners Feedback

January 2012

Applied GCE
6961 01 –
Using Spreadsheet Software

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Unit 11: Using Spreadsheet Software (6961)

General Comments

Although the number of entries was lower than a summer series, the full range of work was encountered. Some high marks and top grades were secured. Interestingly, on this occasion, the quality of the supporting paperwork outweighed the sophistication and complexity of the spreadsheet products themselves. Conversely, there were several instances where a pass grade could not be awarded. However, on each occasion this was entirely due to non-completion of the unit rather than quality of material submitted and was recognised at the centres concerned.

Albeit there were a few anomalies and exceptions, it is pleasing to report that in January 2012 most of the work moderated fulfilled the requirements of the unit in respect of content and was reasonably accurately assessed.

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. A range of support services including Ask the Expert is available for help and guidance throughout delivery of the unit and production of the material for assessment. Individual reports are written for centres at the time of moderation and, following each series, a comprehensive report is published outlining weaknesses observed in both centre and candidate interpretation and approach to the unit.

It was disappointing to note that some centres have not yet addressed previously reported issues and there were examples of inaccurate, over-generous assessment particularly in relation to strands (b) and (c).

A few candidates had used the created spreadsheet solution as their project for Unit 6958. Whilst this approach is understandable, centres should ensure that candidates collate and provide two sets of evidence which are clearly differentiated and mapped to the individual unit requirements.

Comments on strand (a) — Functional Specification

The required content is outlined in 11.2 of the unit specification. Many candidates addressed this strand reasonably well and with a few exceptions centre assessment of the strand was accurate. The success criteria and whether or not they are measurable is, more often than not, the primary omission when full marks for the strand are not confirmed.

A considerable number of the functional specifications moderated indicated that candidates had 'ownership' of a problem to be solved. This approach reflects best practice and affords the opportunity to devise, design and create a unique product. It was pleasing to note that very few generic and often restrictive assignment briefs had been used.

There were examples of excessive and irrelevant material and, as at previous moderation windows, some candidates still relied on content from

unit 6958 to support this strand rather than producing the expected stand-alone functional specification.

Comments on strand (b) – Design

The aspects about which decisions are expected to be made, ideally prior to commencement of the spreadsheet product itself, are listed in 11.3 of the specification and expanded in 11.4-11.9.   Documenting decisions made including prototypes, feedback from the 'sponsor', their involvement in informing development and other pertinent issues is the evidence required for this strand.

Overall the quality of the material submitted for this strand was higher than is often encountered. That said, as is so often the case, this is the strand where the largest mark adjustments are often made.   Some centre assessors appear 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.

The lack of commentaries on the finished product and/or processes undertaken was encouraging but many candidates submitted handwritten schematic drawings considering little more than the user interface, aesthetics, layout and presentation of their product.   Often candidates fail to identify or explain what they plan to do in relation to input, output, the incorporation of complex functions and formulae, future proofing and validation.

Future proofing remains problematic and is often misunderstood.

Comments on strand c – Fully Working Spreadsheet Solution

As required, the actual spreadsheet products were all included in all the portfolios at this moderation window.

The principal requirement of the strand is to produce a "technically complex working spreadsheet". Other than the incomplete portfolios reported above, there were only three examples of candidates failing to submit products incorporating the requisite complex functions and formulae at this moderation window.- which is very encouraging indeed.

Notwithstanding the above, Visual Basic was used in some centres to address issues of complexity.   This is not appropriate and moderators cannot be expected to examine code to establish use of formulae. Disappointingly, text based systems, where the product should clearly have been a database and created using alternative software, were regularly presented at this moderation.

Although the 'non-complex' formulae and functions - 2 cell formulae, If statements, sum, countif, average etc – were frequently incorporated in the products submitted it is encouraging that these are now being supplemented with the far more sophisticated and/or complex functions and formulae expected.

Submitted by all candidates the user and, separate, technical guides were not always comprehensive and/or fit for purpose with validation and associated error messages often the major omission from the user guides. 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

Other than where full marks were generously awarded this strand was reasonably well evidenced and accurately assessed at this.

Screenshots showing direct evidence of tests having been undertaken was the norm although rigorous testing of validation was sporadic and not all candidates took a structured approach to each test utilising a range of data. Instances of testing at a superficial level ie of hyperlinks and macro buttons rather than the spreadsheet itself were regularly encountered.

Some candidates still do not appear to appreciate the relevance of the prototypes and end user involvement in development of the product..

Comments on strand e — Evaluation

There were some excellent evaluations presented at this moderation window with many candidates accessing top MB2 and/or MB3.

Disappointingly, a considerable number of candidates appear to struggle with this strand of the unit presenting descriptive detail of processes undertaken rather than evaluative content.

As mentioned, many centres combine undertaking this unit with unit 6958 and, although few in number, there was material in some of the evaluations which directly related to project management rather than unit 6961 and the spreadsheet product itself. The best evaluations address all three aspects of the strand well, relate to the initial objectives/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.

Grade Boundaries
Centres are reminded that the GCE in Applied ICT is an Awarded qualification. As such, grade boundaries are subject to review each series for both written paper and coursework units.

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

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