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Moderators' Report/ Principal Moderator Feedback

Summer 2014

Pearson Edexcel GCE in Applied ICT (6961) Paper 01 Using Spreadsheet Software

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General Comments

It is pleasing to report that at this series the full range of marks was encountered, there were some sophisticated spreadsheet products with associated qualitative documentation and a good number of high marks and top grades secured. Application of a wide range of software skills was well evidenced across a range and variety of products.

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. Large numbers of centres are now correctly interpreting the criteria and applying the guidance well to ensure accurate assessment and this is good to note. It is though disappointing that instances of high and generous marks being awarded to weak and incomplete material/documentation are still frequently encountered.

The requirements for unit 6961 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.

Upon completion of moderation of a centre's cohort, a report is written for each centre that identies issues specific to their assessment of the material submitted. Whether or nt due to the fact that the report does not reach the necessary individual(s), the regularity with which the points raised do not appear to be considered or fully addressed is particularly disappointing.

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

To access 6961 the design, prototyping, development and testing of a spreadsheet, devised to solve a perceived or real problem, is required. Each candidate's portfolio of work is expected to be totally unique. The escalation in the use of 'off the shelf' documentation and unit guidance is very worrying. This approach often generates very similar materials and/or

products and, obviously, impacts on independence of working. In a few cases it was apparent that candidates had been provided with a spreadsheet -including its data and even some formulae – and all they were required to do was develop, edit and amend it. This approach is to be discouraged; it is totally unacceptable in the context of this unit and qualification.

Many candidates use the created spreadsheet solution as their project for Unit 6958. This approach is understandable but 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. There were a considerable number of examples of misplaced 6958 documentation 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.

Comments on strand (a) – Functional Specification

The quality of the functional specifications submitted at this series was good overall with 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 being misunderstood by the majority. It was noticeable how infrequently MB3 was awarded at this series.

There were still instances where, once the tasks were identified, it should have been readily apparent that a spreadsheet was not the ideal approach and that the tasks required of the product were better suited to database software. Many candidates actually described their artefact as a database throughout the portfolio.

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

Comments on strand (b) – Design

It was good to note that this strand is now being addressed much better, and more accurately, than in the past; the quality of work is undoubtedly improving.

Notwithstanding the above, this strand is usually that which generates regular mark adjustments. Despite all previous reports many assessors do not differentiate between the initial design work and the content/incorporated facilities of the product itself. Further, candidates frequently present retrospective material ie commentaries on decisions made and processes undertaken evidenced with screenshots from the finished product.

Itemised in 11.3 of the specification and expanded in 11.4-11.9 are the various aspects about which decisions are expected to be made prior to commencement of the spreadsheet product itself and, perhaps, developed during production. Documenting initial ideas and, perhaps, subsequent changes plus decisions made including prototypes, feedback from the 'sponsor', 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.

As mentioned, the quality of some of the material submitted for this strand was higher than is often encountered. Candidates own fall down in this strand by concentrating on the layout of the user interface, aesthetics and presentation of their product and failing to consider what they plan 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 remained problematic and frequently misunderstood.

Comments on strand (c) – Fully Working Spreadsheet Solution

The designed and devised spreadsheet product is expected to be included in the candidate portfolio and accessible; this was not always the case at this series. There were products omitted in some cases but by far the biggest problem was access to the spreadsheets - password protected systems with inoperative passwords or, in many cases, passwords that could not be located at all. Obviously this makes moderation very difficult indeed as moderators are required to check functionality of the product is . Please note, password protection of the products is not necessary.

This strand is often evidenced extremely well but there remain innumerable instances where, although used appropriately, the range of software facilities incorporated within the products is limited. The range and effectiveness of the facilities used is the determinant of the mark band accessible in this strand.

Again at this series there were several examples of entire centre cohorts developing linked, updating workbooks; others where the products comprised dozens of repetitive worksheets and repeated formulae. Neither of these approaches is necessary, a single workbook with macro navigation between a handful of worksheets will suffice.

The majority of 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 usually the major omission.

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

It was disappointing to note the frequency with which the evidence presented for this strand comprised little more than long test tables often showing no more than 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.

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

Comments on strand (e) – Evaluation

Some good evaluations were presented at this series; the improvement in these documents is noticeable; 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 and these are more often than not written in the first person.
Candidates often seem oblivious to obvious issues/shortcomings of their final spreadsheet product and fail 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. 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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