

Unit1 : Project Failures Study

Question 1: What do you believe are the three most common reasons for project failure?

The 3 most common reasons for project failure are:

1. Leadership and governance
2. Poor design
3. Technical failure

Often, these problems are related and it can be over-simplistic to consider the problems as completely mutually exclusive. For example, poor design in itself would not be a critical fault if there was appropriate leadership and management checks and balances in place. Ultimately, all failures are the result of poor leadership and governance as it is the role of leaders to exercise appropriate oversight, monitoring and steer solutions to meet agreed objectives.

Question 2: Give two examples of failures that support your choices (there are several examples in the lecturecast).

Example 1 – Ofqual 2020 GCSE Grades

Due to the COVID pandemic, GCSE and A-Level examinations were cancelled in 2020 and 2021. In the summer of 2020, Ofqual produced calculated grades. This process depended Ofqual developing a software system designed to calculate the grade that pupils would receive based on a range of contextual factors including:

- The historic performance of the school where a pupil was enrolled
- The characteristics of the individual pupil (ie gender, special educational need (SEN), prior performance at primary school, etc)
- National trends in the particular subject.

However, there was a clear issue with both the design of the algorithm and the leadership and governance of the project itself. Firstly, the design of the algorithm was too simplistic and could not cover enough data about the individual child. Secondly, there was a design flaw in that the analysis may have been a good predictor of cohort performance, but unlikely to be a fair predictor of individual performance. This design flaw is also a leadership issue, where the key decision makers did not fully appreciate the requirements of the final users (ie individual students) but were primarily considered with ensuring schools did not (even unintentionally) create artificial grade inflation. This project was a spectacular failure resulting in:

- Grade inflation impacting pupils past and future

- Confusion for employers regarding their understanding of the value of a grade
- The removal of the Ofqual Chair
- A new (equally flawed) system for awarding grades in 2021
- A reshuffle for the secretary of state for education.
- A review of guidance to schools and colleges to mitigate the impact of any future pandemic or event which could result in cancellation of examinations at a national level.

Example 2 – UK Post Office Scandal

‘The Post Office Horizon scandal has been called the UK's most widespread miscarriage of justice, after hundreds of people were prosecuted on the basis of data from faulty software.’ (BBC, 2025). Nearly one thousand postmasters were prosecuted as a result of the faulty Horizon IT system which delivered accountancy software. The faults in the reconciliation process meant that a technical fault appeared to indicate that postmasters had fraudulently taken withdrawn funds from the Post Office. This, in turn, led to widespread prosecutions and, in many cases, convictions with associated prison sentences.

While the root cause of the problem was a technical fault in the system, the most concerning issue is the leadership and governance. In fact, according to the BBC, postmasters complained to Fujitsu who developed the software system but these complaints were not effectively resolved as a result of poor leadership. In fact, the poor leadership did not just stop Fujitsu as software developers, but also the leaders of the Post Office as the client also bear some responsibility. In fact Paul Vennells resigned and returned her CBE, illustrating that client leadership is as important as project leadership.

References

BBC (2025) ‘Post Office Horizon scandal: Why hundreds were wrongly prosecuted’. Available at: [Post Office Horizon scandal: Why hundreds were wrongly prosecuted - BBC News](#). Accessed 19th July 2025

Crisp, V. *et al.* (2024) ‘A structured discussion of the fairness of GCSE and A level grades in England in summer 2020 and 2021’, *Research Papers in Education*, 40(1), pp. 44–71. doi: 10.1080/02671522.2024.2318046.