Coursework report 2012–13

CO3320 Project – Preliminary Project report

The primary purpose of the **Preliminary Project Report (PPR)** is to encourage students to begin thinking about, and working on, their Projects at an early stage of the year.

The academic year 2012−13 year saw the introduction of a revised version of the **Project** subject guide (Taylor, 2012). In addition to the new submission arrangements for the PPR (outlined in Section 8.2.1 of the subject guide), the required format of the PPR was also somewhat different to previous years. The required format is set out in Section 6.1 of the subject guide. Most students submitted their reports in the new format, although a handful submitted PPRs in the old format. These students were not heavily penalised for this, although this may not be the case in future years. Current students are warned to review the requirements set out in the **most up-to-date (that is, the current)** version of the subject guide before submitting their work (this advice applies to all other courses too!).

The 2012−13 year was also the first in which we required **all** students to submit their Preliminary Project Reports (PPRs) online via the Goldsmiths Computing VLE. No hard-copy submission was required, and all students received feedback on their progress from Goldsmiths' staff within three weeks of the submission deadline.

The more information a PPR contains about work done to date, problems encountered, and future plans, the easier it is for Goldsmiths staff to provide helpful feedback. A common failing in this year's PPRs was a lack of specific detail about what had been achieved to date, and what work was planned for the remaining duration of the Project. On the other hand, some of the submitted PPRs were far too long. The subject guide specifies that the Report should be around 2,000−4,000 words. The Examiners are looking for evidence of a student's ability to write clearly and concisely, and their ability to judge what information should be included and what is irrelevant. Around 15−20 pages is usually about right for the PPR.

Ideally, the Examiners are looking for a Project to address a specific problem by following the structure of an academic research project: identifying a specific question to be addressed, proposing a means of answering that question (which may entail proposing a solution to an identified problem), performing some sort of experimental data collection relating to the proposed means of answering the question, analysing the collected data, and drawing conclusions from the analysis, which relate back to the original research question.

Projects which merely involve the implementation of a piece of software or website, with no academic question driving the development, will struggle to achieve high marks. In order for such Projects to be acceptable, they must demonstrate the application of solid software development practice (including requirements gathering, design, implementation, testing and evaluation). Even a Project which is, on the face of it, a straightforward software development task, can be cast as an academic research project if appropriate questions can be addressed (for example; Can novel feature *X* improve some aspect of a business process?; Can novel user interface feature *Y* improve customer satisfaction of the system?). The more specific

a question that can be framed, and the more specific the means of analysis, the easier it will be to provide a definitive answer to it in the Project.

In addition to identifying an appropriate topic, it is important that the Project plan is realistic and achievable within the time available. Some students presented Project plans that were far too ambitious. It is better to submit a smaller, but complete, Project than to submit a more ambitious, but incomplete, one. Plans for further extending the work can always be discussed at the end of the final Project Report if desired.

The Literature review is an important aspect of your Project, and the PPR should include a summary of the literature you have reviewed to date. The Literature review serves to put your Project in the context of what other people are doing in the same area. By having a good knowledge of what other people have done, you are less likely to 'reinvent the wheel'; you might avoid approaches that other people have tried and failed to make work; and you might find inspiration for how to do things better. A weakness of some of this year's PPRs is the use of references to websites rather than to academic sources such as journals or conference papers. The problem with websites is that they are not peer-reviewed, and the information they contain is not necessarily reliable. If you are using information obtained from websites, consider how reliable it is, and consider including some discussion about the reliability of your sources.

Another issue concerning references and citation is that some students included a Reference list at the end of their PPR, but did not indicate in the main text of their PPR which references were relevant where. This is done by using a **citation**, which is a short marker in the main text (e.g. '(Taylor, 2012)') which denotes an item in the Reference list. Even more importantly, some students copied sentences from other authors' work without the proper use of quotation marks and citations. It is perfectly acceptable to copy text from another source (within reason), but only if you clearly indicate, through the use of quotation marks and a citation, where you have obtained the text from. Failure to do this raises the suspicion of plagiarism — trying to present someone else's work as your own — whether intentional or otherwise. There are severe consequences for plagiarism, so be very sure you know how to use quotations, citations and references appropriately.

In addition to identifying a specific question to be addressed, it is also very important to be clear right at the beginning of your Project exactly how you are going to **evaluate** the success of your work. A common failing in the PPRs was a lack of a clear plan for evaluation.

Think about what question(s) you want to answer, then think carefully about some of the following more specific issues:

- How will you test the system?
- What results data will you collect?
- How will you analyse the results?
- How will you judge the significance of the results (e.g. what will you compare them against)?

For Projects which involve developing software for a group of intended users, be sure to include in your Project plan a process of stakeholder consultation at the start of the Project to establish their requirements and their views on your proposed solutions. There are very few cases where such stakeholder consultation will not be appropriate.

For software development projects, in addition to stakeholder consultation at the design stage, it is also important to include some element of stakeholder evaluation after the system has been developed. For such Projects, care should be taken at an early stage to decide who will evaluate the end product, and how such evaluation will be carried out. It may be that different sorts of evaluation are appropriate for different groups of stakeholders. Without seeking stakeholder evaluation and analysing the results, it can be hard to evaluate whether the Project has succeeded or failed in its goals.

For Projects that involve questionnaires and user feedback, many of the PPRs showed a lack of thought about exactly what would be required. Be sure to think about questions such as:

- Who will you ask? (Is there a single group of stakeholders, or multiple groups? How can you select the most representative sample possible from each group?)
- How many people do you need to include in order to generate reliable results? (Think about what is required for statistical significance, although sometimes practical matters may prevent you from including as many people as you would like.)
- What will you ask?
- How will you analyse the data?
- How long will all of this take?

In data collection and analysis, as in all other aspects of the Project, the more detailed and specific you can be at an early stage of the Project about exactly what you are going to do, how you are going to do it, and how long it will take, the higher the chance of your completing a successful Project on time.

In general, the 2012−13 PPRs spanned a very wide range of standards, from the very weak to the truly outstanding. The preceding comments have highlighted some of the common problems. Further advice on how to produce a good PPR can be obtained in the following ways:

- Read the **CO3320 Project** subject guide.
- Look at examples of good Projects from previous years in the Project Library section of the Goldsmiths Computing VLE: https://computing.elearning.london.ac.uk/mod/page/view.php?id=1846
- Discuss problems and questions with fellow students on the Discussion forum of the VLE: https://computing.elearning.london.ac.uk/mod/forum/view.php?id=879