Coursework report 2010–2011
2910320 Preliminary project report

This was the first year in which we have asked students to submit a preliminary project report (PPR). The primary purpose of this new requirement is to encourage students to begin thinking about, and working on, their projects at an early stage in the year. In addition, students who submitted their PPR online via the VLE (in addition to hard copy) received feedback from the Examiners by the end of January, commenting on their progress to date and plans for future work.

Approximately one third of students took advantage of online submission and feedback. The average mark for the PPR by students who submitted their PPR online was 5% higher than that of those who did *not* submit online (and so did not receive feedback). The preliminary data show that those who submitted their PPRs online also scored slightly higher on average in their final reports. However, at this stage we cannot say whether this improvement was influenced by the feedback received, or whether the more able students were more likely to submit their PPRs online in the first place.

The structure required of the PPR is specified in Section 1.6 of the subject guide. The report is expected to comprise a title page, introduction, terms of reference, progress to date, planned work, appendices and references. Marks are awarded for each of these sections, and so reports which do not follow this structure may lose out on some of the available marks. A number of students lost marks because of this.

A brief description of what is expected in each section is provided in the subject guide.

Many students apparently misunderstood the purpose of the terms of reference section. This section should clearly state the questions you are attempting to answer in your project, and explain why these are interesting questions (i.e. the justification for the work should be explained).

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 not achieve high marks. They may, however, be deemed sufficient for a pass if they demonstrate the application of solid software development practice. 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 (e.g. 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.

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.

Many students provided a work plan for their project only at a very high level. The more specific you can be about your work plan, the more helpful you will find it for guiding your work and for quickly spotting if and when things are starting to fall behind schedule. A more specific plan can be made by dividing large tasks into a number of smaller sub-tasks, and providing time estimates for each of those (and also noting any dependencies that may exist between tasks).

As always with any submitted work, care should be taken in providing full references to any cited work. A disappointingly high number of PPRs were marked down for not referring to related previous work. On the other hand, do not include references in the reference section to any work which has not been cited in the PPR. If you think it is important to mention such texts, these may be listed in a separate bibliography section, although it is rarely necessary to do this (if the work is relevant, it probably should have been mentioned in the main text).

Finally, it is good to see a realistic assessment in the PPR of what you have achieved so far, and of how much work is left to do. If your original project plan is already starting to look unachievable at this stage, give some consideration to contingency plans for cutting down on the goals of the work. For the final project submission, it is better to submit a smaller, well planned, and complete piece of work, than an incomplete larger project which was not finished because you ran out of time. Remember, in addition to allowing the Examiners to evaluate what you have achieved so far, the PPR is intended to be beneficial for your own planning and successful completion of the project.