

# **Examination Guidance for the Advanced Certificate in PPSO Examinations**

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## Contents

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Introduction.....	3
Examination Objectives.....	3
Entry Requirements for the Examination.....	3
Preparation for the Examination.....	3
Structure of the Written Examination.....	4
Pass Mark .....	4
Topics Commonly Addressed .....	4
Answering the Questions .....	5
Structuring the Answer .....	6
Recommendation for the allocation of time during the Examination .....	6
Candidates Notes and Deletions.....	6
General Advice.....	6
The Oral Examination.....	7
Additional Resources .....	7
Syllabus	7
Sample Paper	7
Reading List .....	7
Guidance on the Interpretation of Examination Questions.....	7
Terminology.....	8

## Introduction

This document has been produced by ISEB to help candidates and Training Providers alike provide general guidance on how to answer questions in the examination and to understand the terminology used in the examinations.

The written examination is the second part of the process leading to the Advanced Certificate in Programme and Project Support Office. Candidates must have taken and passed the Essentials examination before they can take the Advanced Certificate.

Success and award of the Advanced Certificate will depend upon achieving a pass in the written Advanced examination and success in the third and final part of the process, the Oral Examination.

Training Providers will use trained staff that will be able to deliver a high quality course which have been reviewed and approved by ISEB.

## Examination Objectives

The objectives of the examination process are to enable candidates to demonstrate:

- their understanding of the functions, processes, and procedures of Programme and/or Project Support Offices;
- an ability to establish and/or manage and operate a Support Office on a day-to-day basis;
- an ability to support the management and implementation of change, taking due account of stakeholder sensitivities and impacts;
- an ability to assess strategic and operational situations and to make recommendations to Senior Management based on sensible analysis.

## Entry Requirements for the Examination

Candidates must hold the [Certificate in Programme and Project Support Office Essentials](#) prior to taking the Advanced examination.

Candidates should also have a basic working knowledge of IT, and it is recommended that all candidates attend an ISEB approved training course run by an accredited Training Provider.

Candidates can apply for the direct entry route (those candidates who do not want to attend the training course) but they must be able to demonstrate a minimum of two years relevant experience.

## Preparation for the Examination

Attendance at a training course offered by an Accredited Training Provider is recommended (the course will include the examination). However, anyone who has had a minimum of two years relevant experience in a Programme & Project Support Office or in an IT project can apply to take the examination directly without attending a course.

A training course will normally include either a full mock exam or a partial mock exam so that candidates will have an insight into what they can expect on the day of the live examination. Advice about the oral examination will also be given during a course.

## Structure of the Written Examination

Candidates will be required to complete a two hour written 'closed book' examination. The examination paper comprises of a scenario and four questions all based on the examination syllabus. There will be 15 minutes reading time beforehand to read the scenario and questions. Question 1 is compulsory attracting 60 marks. The candidate then has a choice of two additional questions from the remaining three and each is worth a further 20 marks.

Some or all of the questions may be sub-divided into parts. Where this is the case the specific mark that is allotted to a particular part will be shown.

## Pass Mark

In order to achieve a pass, candidates must achieve a minimum of 30 marks (50%) of Question 1 together with sufficient marks from the other two questions answered to bring the total to at least 50. Candidates who pass the written examination will be invited to attend an oral examination.

Candidates will need to have passed both the written and oral examination to be awarded the Advanced Certificate in PPSO.

## Topics Commonly Addressed

The questions will be based around topics in both the Essentials and Advanced syllabuses. Within that broad framework of twelve syllabus sections, specific topics that are typically examined are:-

- the setting up of a PPSO
- how investment on PPSO provision can be justified
- ways of rationalising disparate PPSO provision within an organisation
- how business initiatives e.g. organisational expansions or mergers can best be supported
- developing/expanding PPSO services in a business environment
- the benefits to an organisation of having a PPSO function
- use of specific methods/techniques to support Programmes and Projects

Candidates will need to demonstrate an understanding of basic processes as well as the ability to tailor this knowledge to fit a given scenario appropriately. Generic answers, unless specifically asked for, are unlikely to score many marks.

Evidence of commercial awareness and the costs of implementing a PPSO or new processes is a key element that examiners will be looking for when questions in these topic areas are asked. For example, what returns both tangible and intangible, would a company get on its investment. A standard reporting process may be useful but if it costs £50,000 per annum to run, why would it be implemented?

Understanding the importance of the relationship between a PPSO function and the rest of the organisation is another key element that underlies the effective operation of the various processes and procedures. For example, expertise and practical support in particular programme and project management methods and techniques needs to be complemented by appropriate interpersonal skills.

## Answering the Questions

There are two hours in which questions are to be answered. It seems too obvious to suggest that the question and all of the accompanying information should be read thoroughly, yet the advice often given bears repeating – **read the question**, and **answer the question**.

The first 15 minutes (reading time) of the examination period is intended to allow the candidate to assimilate all the information provided. After this period there are two hours in which questions are to be answered.

How the answer should be structured depends entirely on the question asked. Candidates should remember that the finished script, when passed to the marker, becomes the only means by which a judgement can be reached upon whether the candidate appears to know and understand the various aspects associated with testing.

Questions can be broadly categorised as ‘analytical’, ‘contextual’ or ‘theoretical’. It is unlikely that all examination papers will contain questions solely in one category.

Analytical questions will require candidates to use the information given. For example, a particular question may provide candidates with an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to determine the nature of a problem situation, possibly also to suggest solutions and show understanding of appropriate ways of implementing them.

Contextual questions will require candidates to show how particular techniques, methods or approaches may be applicable to the circumstances described in a given scenario. For example, a particular question may provide candidates with an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of how specific PPSO functions such as support for estimating, planning, monitoring and control activities, or risk management and configuration management activities could be implemented in an appropriate way.

Theoretical questions draw on a candidate’s general knowledge of all of the topics in the syllabus by asking for specific explanations or descriptions. These may or may not be required to be linked to the scenario information. For example, candidates may be asked to suggest suitable evaluation criteria to be considered when selecting software tools, or to offer pros and cons of a given procedures, process, or product generically rather than in a scenario-specific situation.

Clear, legible writing is necessary though no marks are earned or lost because of the standard of handwriting. It is simply the case that if an answer cannot be read it cannot be marked.

These are broad aims applied to the live papers but should not be taken as a guarantee of the structure of any given examination or any specific question. However, a candidate who has prepared to answer questions structured in the manner above will be well prepared for the examination.

## **Structuring the Answer**

Where explanations, descriptions, summaries or comments are asked for, then the answer can be presented in an essay style (though the essay structure itself neither earns nor loses marks). Answers may be equally comprehensive if set out in note or 'bullet list' form provided it is perfectly clear what points are being made and the information is not so disjointed or incoherent as to raise doubts about the candidate's understanding.

Where lists are required, then lists should be created. If a particular number of items in that list are specified then provide only that number, no more. In general, marks will only be awarded for the first number of items the list that has been specified.

## **Recommendation for the allocation of time during the Examination**

It is recommended that candidates spend up to 60 minutes on Question 1 and 25 minutes each for the remaining 2 questions allowing the final 10 minutes reviewing the answers provided.

## **Candidates Notes and Deletions**

Normally, the marker will not take into consideration any rough work or deletions, but in the event of a borderline fail, the marker may consider these notes to see if there is further evidence of the candidate's knowledge which has not been adequately demonstrated in the answers given.

## **General Advice**

The markers will look at the question overall and judge the quality and structure of the answer as well as counting the marks. Whilst the number of valid points made is important, so is the overall 'feel' of the answer in arriving at the mark.

Do not repeat the words of the question at the beginning of an answer.

Do not use the term 'etc.' in any answer. The marker has no way of knowing whether the term masks a lack of detailed knowledge or is simply a way of saving time or even an assumption that what is not written is so obvious that it does not need stating. (it does – even though it may seem obvious).

Do not refer the marker to an answer given elsewhere in the answer script as part of a completely different Question (for example see answer to Q1 when responding to Q3). However, within the answer(s) to the same main question you may cross refer (for example, see answer to Q1.a) when answering Q1.c). In general, however, if something that is written elsewhere seems to be relevant in another answer make sure that it is appropriate to do so; there may be a subtly different context or connotation.

Where your answer uses information that is not supplied in the paper, please ensure that any assumptions that you make are stated in your answer.

Where answers can draw on the scenario, they should do so. In such cases, it is not sufficient merely to repeat a PPSO methodology.

## **The Oral Examination**

The oral examination will last up to 45 minutes and candidates can be questioned on any syllabus topic, including those already covered in the written examination.

Candidates must take the oral examination within 12 months of the notification of the written examination result.

To be awarded the Advanced Certificate in PPSO, candidates will need to have passed both the written and the oral examination.

Further information can be found in the document entitled Guidance for Oral Exam Candidates at <http://www.bcs.org/server.php?show=nav.7159> .

## **Additional Resources**

### **Syllabus**

A full and detailed syllabus for each qualification can be downloaded free of charge from the ISEB website: [PPSO Advanced Syllabus](#).

### **Sample Paper**

Candidates can purchase a sample paper from ISEB and this is written in exactly the same style as a live paper. The sample paper gives an overview of what can be expected by a candidate in the live examination. Please contact Customer Services to request a sample paper.

### **Reading List**

Candidates can download the recommended [PPSO Reading List](#) from the ISEB website.

## **Guidance on the Interpretation of Examination Questions**

Certain terms are frequently used by ISEB when phrasing particular questions and the purpose of the table below is to provide guidance in what these terms are, how they should be interpreted and the way in which the answers can be best structured to address the questions.

## Terminology

Typically questions will ask the candidate to 'explain', 'describe', 'identify', 'outline', 'suggest', 'list', 'draw', 'create', or 'summarise'. Some questions may ask the candidate 'how' they would 'solve' or 'overcome' a problem situation, or 'improve' an unsatisfactory situation, or how they would 'introduce' or 'implement' a particular solution.

Candidates must ensure that their answers stick to the point of the questions (e.g. if the question asks what, do not go off at too much of a tangent and answer 'how'. There are rules within this simple structure (e.g. if the question asked 'who' the bulk of the marks will be for the rationale for the 'who' chosen). Often terms are combined e.g. 'What' and 'Why' so candidates must ensure that both parts of the question are answered fully. Answering only one part of the question will automatically reduce the number of marks available.

The examination paper may use PRINCE2™, MSP™ and MoR™ terminology in addition to generic terms.

Term	Example	Answering the Question
Describe	Describe the benefit of a [ <i>something</i> ] to an organisation.	The word describe can be used on its own or qualified in different ways. For example. describe how, describe when etc. Detail your answer in narrative form so as to demonstrate your understanding of the topic being examined. Your answer requires a level of detail that is dependent upon the maximum marks available. So, more detail is required for a 10 mark question than a 5 mark question.
Explain	Explain the importance of a [ <i>particular</i> ] document	The word "explain" is similar to the word "describe" although you would be expected to clarify each of the points you include so as to demonstrate your understanding of the question being asked. Inevitably, you will need to include more detail in your answer. Your answer requires a level of detail that is commensurate with the number of marks available.
Advise	Advise the Chief Executive on how to prepare a [ <i>particular</i> ] document	These questions usually require detail and are more often associated with 20 mark questions. If the question tells you that you have the role of advisor, try to include some practical considerations to your answer.
List	List 5 headings you would expect to find in a [ <i>particular</i> ] document	A simple numbered or bullet point list is all that is needed. No need to expand upon the reasoning behind any of the ingredients listed. However do provide only 5 (in this instance), no more. In general if the list were to contain 6 or more when only 5 were asked for marks then only the first 5 will read and marked.

Identify	Identify 2 reasons why [a <i>situation</i> ] may have arisen	The word "Identify" is similar to the word "List" or "Describe". Your answer should be confined to the number you are were asked to identify. More than that number will not be marked.
What and why	What is a [ <i>particular</i> ] document and why is it important?	Very similar to "explain" questions in that your answer must include a reasoned explanation to substantiate your answer. Remember to answer <b>both</b> What <b>and</b> Why. Failure to do so will automatically reduce the number of marks it is possible to achieve.