

Exams: England

Some families come to home education in an emergency situation and need to sign up for exams as quickly as possible, but ideally if you can you should plan GCSEs well in advance, particularly if you have special requirements regarding access or extra time/facilities for dyslexia etc. Families should also bear in mind that colleges are primarily interested in Maths and English GCSE and that even the most academic college courses will not generally require more than 5 GCSEs rather than the 8, 10 or 12+ GCSEs which may be taken in some state schools.

Private Candidates: Home educated young people can take GCSEs as private candidates, though not all examination boards have suitable GCSEs. If you don't have internet access at home, it's worth going to your local library to investigate the websites of the different exam boards such as AQA and Edexcel: find them by entering 'exam boards' in any search engine (e.g., Google, Bing). Another approach is to investigate the information from distance learning providers such as NEC or Oxford Home Schooling. On the exam board websites, you will find not only the academic syllabus but also examples of the forms you will need to fill in for registration. It is important to note that you have to fill in these forms yourself; the exam centre doesn't do it for you.

Finding an exam centre: It can be difficult for home educated young people to find anywhere to sit exams. State schools are often unwilling to open their doors to private candidates. Some home educators have found that independent schools are very helpful, and Education Otherwise and the Home Education Advisory Service have worked with the Independent Schools Council to convince private schools that it can be both straightforward and rewarding to open their doors to home educators. Some home educators, particularly in the South of England and in London, use private tuition centres or tutorial colleges as a place to sit exams. It is worth shopping around as the fees may vary considerably, but in some areas there will be little or no choice of provider. Many experienced home educators say it is better to start by trying to find an exam centre, rather than by choosing a syllabus from an exam board or buying a distance learning package. A few local authorities may offer meetings with exam officers and subject teachers, and provide invigilation sessions for groupwork and speech and language elements of English GCSEs.

Peer support: There is an internet support list dedicated to GCSEs and other exams. To subscribe, go to http://groups.yahoo.com/group/HE-Exams-GCSE-A_AS_Levels-OU-Others

Cost: Home educators wishing to take exams as private candidates have to factor in the cost of exam board fees and the cost of exam centre invigilation. In addition, some home educators use correspondence courses such as NEC or Oxford Home Schooling. Combined, these fees can add up to several hundred pounds per exam. In principle, there is no funding for home educated young people to take exams. However, the Government made the following statement on the Department for Education website: "Funding may be available where a local authority provides significant financial support for a home educated young person in two specific circumstances. These are, first, where the young person has SEN and secondly where the young person attends further education college to take GCSEs or other courses. Where significant financial support is being provided, the LA can claim funding from the Department through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG)."

Controlled Assessments: There has been a major review of the internal assessment component of GCSEs, which will take effect in most subjects from the first exams in the summer of 2011. GCSEs are divided into components for external and internal assessment. For a very few subjects, there will be 100% external assessment in the form of examinations. However, for most GCSE subjects there will be a balance of external exams and internal assessment. English and maths are different. They are seen as 'gatekeeper' GCSE subjects, since progression to the Level 3 frequently (though of course not always) depends on having GCSE Maths and English. Maths won't have any internal assessment components, and reform of English GCSEs will be a year behind the main schedule, with the first change occurring in summer 2012. Controlled assessment will be virtually impossible for standard private candidates unless an arrangement can be made with the exam centre.

IGCSEs: Some home educators prefer International GCSEs (IGCSEs), because these are assessed externally by public examination and there is no issue with coursework or other internal assessment - though it can be more difficult to find an exam centre for IGCSEs.

Open University: The OU accepts students under the age of 18 who can demonstrate that they are able to cope with the requirements of the course, both in academic terms and also in terms of emotional maturity and resilience. OU credits are accepted by some universities.

Non-standard entry to college: Some home educating families have found that when they make personal enquiries at the local FE college, introduce the home educated young person and explain about the difficulty of taking GCSEs, the college will look very favourably on what is called 'non-standard entrance' – i.e., without GCSEs - to A level or equivalent Level 3 courses. It is better not to try and do this at the college's annual Open Evening, but to phone or email the college and make a separate appointment. An early interest looks good; you can make contact when the young person is 14 or 15, and you don't have to wait till the academic year when you would be entitled to go to college. It is also well worth forging links with the course tutors in particular subject areas and arranging to go and talk to them about your interests: this can help to mitigate any shortfall in qualifications. Parents are generally welcome to attend these informal talks. In place of GCSEs the college may ask for a portfolio of work + an extended interview. It is worth marking your application as 'home educated', because this will go some way to explaining discrepancies over GCSEs and can be talked up in your application's covering letter and at the interview. Colleges will not always insist on GCSEs, and you can also sign up to a distance learning course for A Levels without having GCSEs.

Access Arrangements for Special Needs: You may be able to make arrangements to have a scribe, and also to have 25% extra time for the exam, subject to prior assessment. You may also be able to arrange to use a computer + keyboard instead of writing the exam answers by hand. It is necessary to complete the assessment in the prescribed manner well in advance of the exam so that the necessary arrangements can be put in place. You will also need to confirm this in advance with your exam centre, and smaller exam centres may not be able to accommodate you. It is worth asking on home education internet support lists for others' experiences, and also writing to the EO Newsletter to ask people to share their tips. You must plan up to a year before you plan to sit the exam if you want to get dispensations for dyslexia. You need to complete Form 8. Jcq has published regulations here: http://www.jcq.org.uk/exams_office/forms/

Education Otherwise publishes the following Information Sheets, which are also available as pdfs to download from the EO website at <http://www.education-otherwise.net>

Home Education England and Wales • About Education Otherwise • Home Education and Lone Parents (England and Wales) • School Attendance Orders (England) • The Law and Home Education in England and Wales • Educational Philosophies (England) • Home Education and the Local Authority (England) • Funding for Home Education (England) • How people home educate • Home Education and Special Needs (England) • Children Missing Education (England) • Deregistering a Child from School (England) • Home Education and Exams (England) • Flexischooling (England) • Child Benefit (England)

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