

Starting Out with GCSEs/IGCSs as a Home Educator – A Guide



The Basics

- Most school attending children take 10-12 GCSEs over 2 years. Home educators do not need to do this many and can also do them in a shorter or longer timeframe.
- Many home educating families start GCSEs at age 13, doing 1 or 2 a year, for a maximum of 6-8. Some start at age 16 and only do 3 – 5 in total. Of course, some families do fewer and some do more; the good thing is that you can do what suits you, as a family!
- If you de-registered from a school, you cannot usually just carry on with all GCSE courses started in school, as some exam syllabuses can't be taken by private candidates.

To decide what GCSEs to do, and how many you need:

- Look at local college admissions requirements, and work back from there
- Research your child's career interests and work back from there, regarding which subjects are considered prerequisites
- What are your child's interests
- What are your child's strengths and weaknesses
- There are 5 main exam boards you can research
- Look at the GCSE/IGCSE webpages for each exam board, and browse the subjects they offer. Each subject will have a specification/ syllabus which you can download and review, to see what the course covers
- Ask around your local home educating community

Taking the exam

- Home educated students are called external (private) candidates
- Private candidates take GCSEs, IGCSEs and A-levels at an exam centre, which can be a school or a private exam centre dedicated to external candidates. You take the exam under exam conditions, at the published time of the exam, usually alongside other candidates.
- If your child might need extra time or help to enable them to sit exams ask your exam centre about Access Arrangements at least a year before you plan to sit exams.

Key questions answered:

- 1) Most teens, but not all, do GCSEs or IGCSEs. Some are 'required' by Colleges, Universities, etc. - Maths, English, Science are the core requirements. Most apprenticeships also require GCSEs.
- 2) GCSEs often have coursework or elements that need to be completed and graded whilst studying (not all of them do) and most IGCSEs are exam only (most, but not all). IGCSEs and GCSEs are considered the same, for colleges and universities. The 'I' stands for International - meaning that students around the world write these exams. These are also the exams that many private/fee-paying schools do. (more on this in a later section of this guide)
- 3) There is no age limit to do GCSEs, though some exam centres may have age requirements
- 4) The 'aim' of GCSEs is that students can focus on a broad range of subjects and learn them with some degree of depth, before narrowing down and specialising for A levels and then University/College
- 5) Home educators can study for GCSEs on their own at home (using textbooks, online tools etc.) or using local study groups or using tutors/course providers
- 6) To decide what to study, many people look at a) what the child wants to do when they are older, b) what the child is passionate about, c) what will be required by colleges and universities later on.
There is also often specific decision-making about which exams to do first - which ones lay a good foundation for following subjects and which ones will require the most 'effort' and so perhaps should be left until last. (ie. GCSE Statistics is a great precursor for both Maths and Sciences)
- 7) There are 5 main exam boards in the UK, which offer GCSE/IGCSE exams (which you have to arrange yourself, and pay for, in most areas of the UK) --- you will need to arrange to take these exams at a local exam centre (covered later in this guide)
- 8) On the exam board websites, you will find a course 'specification' or 'syllabus' - this explains what the student needs to learn, how they will be examined, how marks will be allocated, when exams can be taken, and what textbooks etc might be available
- 9) When you have a rough idea of what you want to do, contact your local exam centres (see File) and ask what exam boards and exams you can do with them, and what age requirements they may have (if any)
- 10) It may take some back and forth between what you want to do, and what your local exam centres offer, until you make final decisions.
- 11) Many home educating families decide to do between 2 and 5 GCSEs per year,

usually starting around age 14 - to spread them out over 3 years. That being said, some start age 11 and some start age 17. Some only do 3 and some do up to 12 (like they would in schools).

12) Deciding on an exam board - this comes down to three things: a) what is on offer at local exam centres, ie. some exam centres only use some boards and offer only specific subjects; b) the content of the syllabus (is the content of the actual exam subject interesting/compelling/relevant); c) the type of assessment (100% examination? How many exams (papers)? What types of questions on those papers?)

13) In schools, they generally spend 2 years (now some schools are switching to 3) studying 10 to 12 GCSEs, between the ages of 14 and 16. Home educators often only take 1 year to complete a GCSE, because we can do them 2 or 3 per year 😊. (Though of course this too varies by family, and cost can be a deciding factor)

14) GCSEs that can be extremely difficult to do, because of coursework or fieldwork sign-off include: media, film, drama, art, PE, geology, citizenship (there are more)

15) If you can't do a GCSE in a subject such as drama, there are alternative qualifications that may also accrue UCAS points, such as Lamda and the Arts Award.

GCSEs Vs IGCSEs

Overview

The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) are internationally used, specialised, English language curriculum available for students usually moving on to the International Baccalaureate or A-level.

GCSEs and IGCSEs prepare students for further academic study, including progression to AS Level and A Level study, Cambridge Pre-U, IB Diploma Programme and other equivalents.

They are both recognised by academic institutions and employers around the world.

- GCSEs and IGCSEs are qualifications that show you have a good level of knowledge in a subject.
- GCSEs and IGCSEs are recognised by employers and post secondary institutions in the UK.
- Young people usually take GCSEs between the ages of 14 and 18. With us, you can take them at any age.
- GCSEs and IGCSEs are exam-based and designed to test knowledge and understanding in a subject.
- GCSEs and IGCSEs both earn UCAS points in the UK, which are used in College/University entry

What are IGCSEs?

IGCSE simply means International GCSE and are equivalent to GCSEs; they are almost exactly the same as GCSEs, except they do not have compulsory coursework.

Since the 9-1 GCSEs have been introduced, UK state schools will no longer gain league table points for IGCSEs so most no longer offer them. However, this does mean that more GCSEs are available to home educators, as many no longer have a coursework component. Many independent schools are continuing to use IGCSEs.

IGCSEs are very highly regarded and many independent and grammar schools use them because they give a better grounding in a subject, particularly if leading on to study at A level. The UCAS guide to UK qualifications, on p86, clearly says IGCSEs are considered grade-for-grade equivalent to GCSEs.

Most IGCSEs have an option to do exams only, with no coursework or controlled assessment, meaning that home educators can study completely independently and do not need a tutor or exam centre to 'sign off' coursework.

Two exam boards offer IGCSEs:

- Edexcel
- Cambridge International Examinations (CIE)

How do GCSE/IGCSE Exams work

What are exam boards:

There are five examination boards in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland:

- AQA
- Cambridge CAIE
- Pearson Edexcel
- OCR
- WJEC/Eduqas (Welsh)

All of the boards are equally well regarded with colleges and universities. You can pick and mix different exam boards for different subjects

How many exams do you write per subject and what types of questions do they have?

It all depends on the subject and the exam board. Some subjects with some exam boards feature long essay-type questions and others are mainly multiple choice and short answer (with 6 being the maximum marks of any question). It is what is termed as 'accessibility' ... if someone says one subject or exam is more accessible, it generally means that the exam style is less challenging (that doesn't mean the content is) and likely to have more small mark questions than fewer long mark questions.

What should I look for on an exam board website?

Syllabus

Each exam board publishes a 'specification' or 'syllabus' for a subject, which outlines all of the content the student must learn, how the content is tested (examination/coursework) and an overview of exam style and structure. They also post previous years' exams on their websites - these are referred to as 'past papers' (the word 'paper' = 'exam').

Past Papers/Marking Schemes

You can use past papers to help understand how the exam is laid out but also, more importantly, to practice exam technique! This is a major issue - exams require a very specific technique in order to get full marks. This is not laid out for students or parents.

Thus, this is probably one of the most fundamental reasons why people hire tutors or pay for courses - because they know the exam technique required for the subject and for the exam board. So, what do you do if you don't hire a tutor or course ... use the past papers, as well as the published marking schemes (which they also make available, for each past paper) to try and work out the exam technique yourself. I always say there are 2 things you need to learn to pass an exam, they are related but not the same: 1) the required content 2) how to write the exam answers, in the required way, in the set time . They are, really, two different things.

Note: If it is a new syllabus, there may not be past papers available but there will be 'sample assessments' instead.

Pearson Edexcel GCSEs Mathematics (9-1) from 2015



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- Teaching and learning materials (90)

Teaching support and training

Learn more about our training and events

- Read our GCSE Mathematics case studies
- See our full range of published resources

Teaching Aids/Materials

You may also find that the exam board provides teaching aids and extra documents that will help you plan your workload or explore topics with more understanding

How do I choose an exam board:

- Not all exam board specifications are the same.
- Ofqual regulations allow for differences between specifications as long as the appropriate amount of stipulated curriculum is covered and the assessment is valid and is sufficiently challenging. These variations allow schools/teachers/parents to choose the specification that they would most enjoy and which they believe would best suit their learner's needs.
- No exam board is 'easier' than another, no course is 'easier' than another, no subject is 'easier' than another.
- You can mix and match exam boards, you do not have to stick with the same one for all subjects

There are three things to be considered, equally as important:

- 1) Which exam boards are used by your local exam centres, and how much do they charge for these exams? Different exam centres use different boards, and charge different fees. Therefore, you need to do this research before you start studying any subject. Try to have a Plan A and Plan B – research and contact at least 2 different exam centres, that you are able to travel to, that take external candidates. (You may find a board and subject you really like, but if you can't find an exam centre you can get to that will offer these exam boards, then it is a fruitless effort.)

- 2) Not all exam boards offer the same subjects and only two offer IGCSEs (Pearson Edexcel and Cambridge CIE).
- 3) Compare across exam boards and exam types – looking at the syllabus and past paper to determine:
 - a. Do you like the content
 - b. Do you like the number of exams to be written
 - c. Do you like the exam styles

Getting Started

Planning

- You don't need to take as many subjects as school pupils do, most home educators take between 3 and 10 GCSEs/IGCSEs, often spaced over 2-4 years (often 2-4 a year, over 1 or more years)
- Look at local college admissions requirements to see how many you need, and which subjects. Often you only need 6 at grade C / 4 and higher, including English and maths, to do A-levels, or 4 to do Btecs.
- There is no minimum or maximum age
- You don't have to do GCSEs at all; there are alternative qualifications

How do you choose which subject to do, when?

- It can really depend on three things: a) which subjects your child enjoys the most (these are often best to start with) ; b) level of maturity required (both in terms of exam writing style - ie essays and in terms of 'sensitive' content); c) what their future plans are (often colleges want GCSEs completed in close proximity to the same ALevel - ie. Mathematics GCSE to be completed within 1-2 years of Mathematics A level).
- Mathematics can be done early if your child does not want to proceed to A level, or if they are prepared to do another Mathematics GCSE closer to A level time (such as Further Maths or Statistics). Maths tends to be good for younger students because it doesn't require advanced exam-writing technique (like English). On the other hand, if you want to go on to do A level Maths, you may need to do it later and demonstrate to your college that you have fresh and current Maths skills. English overall tends to be done later, unless you have been working toward it early and have done good preparatory work/creative writing/reading texts and poems on the syllabus; Science, French, German, Geography and Psychology are 'any age' kind of subjects; Sociology often works for older students because the content is slightly more advanced and so is exam technique.
- You may also want to consider leaving 4 to do in the last year, as many colleges want demonstration that children can manage this kind of workload
- Some subjects have excellent overlap, meaning that some of the content is very similar/the same; this means that studying these subjects at the same time can be very efficient, in that there is slightly 'less' content to learn overall and revision is twice as applicable. You can find overlaps between: Maths/Statistics and

Sciences/Psychology/Geography ... Psychology and Human Biology ... Geography and Development Studies ... Business and Economics and Travel&Tourism Economics and Development Studies there are probably more too

Finding an exam centre

- Home educators are termed private or external candidates.
- Exam centres can be schools or private exam centres dedicated to external candidates.
- Students take the exam under exam conditions, at the published time of the exam, usually alongside other candidates.
- Home educators deal with the exam centre, not the exam board. The exam boards do not take entries direct.

How to study and prepare

You can study independently from textbooks and online resources, or use Distance learning courses or tutors.

Marks and Afterward

- Your exam centre will tell you how and when you can access your marks, it does depends on the centre. Some Exams Officers email then, others require you to collect in person, others will post them on to you (usually at an additional cost), other places will provide online login details to get the results etc.

The Exam Booking Process

1. Check if there are any 'exam centres' in your area which accept "external candidates" for a particular board before you commit to an exam board syllabus. The main exam board are:
Edexcel AQA CIE OCR WJEC/Eduqas
2. Try to register with an exam centre *at least * six months before the exam date.
3. When contacting the exam centre, have the exam board name, course name, and course number to hand. You want to ensure that they are registered with that board and are willing to administer that specific exam.
4. When you contact them, they will let you know their fees, admission deadlines, and processes. Most exam centres want a firm confirmation from you, and payment, 4-5 months ahead of the exam date.
5. It is possible to enter much later, even up to a week before the exam, but exam board fees rise sharply for late entries.
6. Exam fees are made up of the exam board entry fee (between £30 and £50 plus an administration fee for the exam centre.)
7. If a school is registered with Edexcel for GCSEs then they can accept candidates for IGCSEs too. It is possible that the school might not be aware of this but you can ask them to contact Edexcel, who will confirm it for them.
8. Exam centres are under no obligation to accept private candidates; it creates extra work and may involve some disruption to their schedule.
9. Often, independent schools / colleges are your best bet for finding a centre near you.
10. Private, or Independent, exam centres are businesses which specialise in organising exams for external candidates. They are not schools, but are often tutorial colleges offering intensive or after-school tuition.

It is always best if you arrange an exam centre yourself. You can assess travel distance, access arrangements, room arrangements, discuss fees and any other private information that is relevant for you and your child.