

## GCSEs

These are the most common qualifications obtained by school students. They are available to under 16s and are accessible to home educated young people in a number of ways. However GCSEs are not essential. There are lots of walks of life which do not require them, though some young people do want to take GCSEs to extend a particular interest, for their own satisfaction or as a stepping stone to a higher qualification. There is no need to have 8 or 10 of them, to take them all at the same time or to take them at age 16.

If you have decided that you would like to take GCSE qualifications you will have to do a bit of research before you can decide how and where you will do the exams. This leaflet outlines some of the options available to home educating families who are considering studying for GCSE qualifications, but is not an exhaustive list.

### **ORGANISING GCSEs**

GCSEs are administered by **Awarding Bodies** (used to be Examining Boards) who set the course specification (used to be called the syllabus) and method/s of assessment for each subject. There are 3 awarding bodies in England (AQA, OCR and Edexcel) and one each for Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Obtaining a GCSE qualification requires a student to undertake a course of study that includes the topics specified by the chosen awarding body and to provide work for assessment, either during the course of study or in a written exam or both. Some subjects also have a practical/speaking and listening assessment.

The Awarding Bodies each publish subject specifications, past papers and mark schemes, various support materials and exam entry information. Much of this information is available on the relevant websites or can be purchased from their publications dept.

Useful documents to look at initially are the specification for any subject that you are interested in taking and any information for private candidates that is produced.

The **subject specification** details course content and the methods of assessment used to examine the candidates – e.g. written exam, coursework, practical exam and any

alternatives available. Subject content is often similar between awarding bodies, but assessment methods can be different (e.g. one might offer a written exam as an alternative to coursework assessment). Each awarding body publishes subject specifications and it is important to check these out if you want to gain the qualification to ensure that you can meet the necessary requirements.

Most home educated students will enter for GCSE exams as a **private candidate**. This means that the candidate is not registered at an approved exam centre for a course of study and is responsible for making their exam entry, for paying the entry fees, for arranging for the authentication and marking of any required coursework and for finding an exam centre where they can sit the written papers, and any required practical or oral exam.

Private candidate information is updated each year but it is still useful to ask for the latest copy available, even if it is not specifically for the year you want to sit the exam, as it will still contain plenty of relevant information. Remember though to check that nothing is different for the year you do want to sit the exam by obtaining the relevant edition of the booklet.

**Coursework** that is submitted as part of the exam must be authenticated by an approved person. This is normally a tutor/teacher unrelated to the candidate who is in regular contact with the student and has supervised sufficient work to be able to confirm that the submitted coursework is the candidate's own work. Once authenticated, coursework then has to be marked by a person approved by the awarding body – either via an examining centre or by direct arrangement with the awarding body.

The private candidate information published by AQA and Edexcel include a list of **exam centres** that have expressed a willingness to accept entries from private candidates, but this does not mean that they will always accept a private candidate. It might also be possible to make arrangements with local schools or colleges, or with private educational establishments. It often depends, for instance, which subjects/courses the centre's own candidates are taking and whether they have

the capacity in the exam room and/or invigilators required. Accessibility to exam centres as a private candidate varies throughout the country and it can be useful to approach possible exam centres before you embark on a particular course of study. Be aware that all subjects have a specific code number (e.g. AQA Law 3161) and that in some subjects there are several different exams for a single subject (e.g. AQA English B3703 (mature) and AQA English 3702).

Most schools and colleges will have a designated examinations officer responsible for all exam entries. He/she will usually be glad to discuss possibilities, or a formal request could be made to the Principal of an establishment, explaining the situation and requesting support. Some centres may charge an administration fee to a private candidate, as well as the exam entry fee.

## **WAYS TO STUDY FOR GCSEs**

There is no standard way for a home educated young person to study for GCSEs. Each family has to consider which options are available to them and which would suit their circumstances best. Many students use different methods for different subjects. It is possible to use different awarding bodies for different subjects but beware of exam timetable clashes.

Beth attended school for just over a year when she was 5. From then until she was 14 she was educated informally at home, with no academic work or lessons. At 14 she decided to do an Art GCSE to see what it would be like to study a subject formally and she attended an adult evening class at a local community college. The following year she did English and Maths GCSEs, English as a private candidate, and Maths at an adult evening class at a local community college. She achieved Bs in all three GCSEs. Age 16 Beth enrolled to take AS levels in Fine Art and Ceramics, part-time at the local FE College. She approached the Art department directly and spoke to the A-level tutor who was happy to admit her. The college normally has a minimum 4 GCSE entry requirement but this did not apply because she was a part-time student. Towards the end of the AS level course Beth decided that she wanted to study Art at University. She contacted two foundation year courses in Art, one at the college and one at a local university. She had informal interviews at both before applying formally. She was offered places on both courses on the strength of her interviews and her portfolio, with no requirement to obtain an A2 Art qualification. She has been advised that she should have no difficulties in going on to study Art at degree level when she has successfully completed the foundation year course.

**Studying independently** - a student works at home using any materials available to them, and using the subject specification as a guide as to what to study. A family might choose to employ a tutor. The candidate would be responsible for organising for any coursework requirement to be authenticated by an approved person, for arranging for the coursework to be marked, for finding an exam centre that will accept private candidate entries and for entering for the exam.

**Studying by correspondence/distance learning courses** - Many home educated young people like to use correspondence courses to follow a course of study. There are many accredited distance learning colleges that offer a wide variety of courses (not only GCSEs) but fees can be expensive (in June 2004 around £270 per GCSE course) and not all of them will accept students under the age of 16. Throughout the course the student submits assignments to a tutor for marking which enables the tutor to authenticate any coursework requirement. The correspondence college then arranges for coursework marking, either by a tutor or by the awarding body. The candidate is responsible for exam entry and for finding an exam centre at which they can sit the exam.

Robert was educated informally at home until he was 16. Studying independently, using a Maths GCSE text book and Physics GCSE course material he gained Cambridge IGCSEs in Maths and Physics. He then chose to study GCSEs in English, Economics and Chemistry using correspondence courses with tutor support. Aged 17 he decided he would like a more social 'teen scene' and chose to join sixth form at the local secondary school. He continued studying the GCSE courses at home, and he took A level courses in Maths, Further Maths and Physics at school. At the end of his first year he sat 3 AS levels and 3 GCSEs. The school enabled him to sit the written exams for the GCSEs alongside their candidates and offered him access to the Chemistry laboratory for his coursework experiment, although he was technically a private candidate and his coursework was marked by the correspondence college. Aged 18, with 5 GCSEs and 3 A levels Robert took a year out to experience working as an engineer on a placement with the 'Year in Industry' scheme. He is now studying Engineering at Cambridge University.

**Studying at evening classes** - Many adult education centres offer some GCSE courses as part of their programme and in some areas young people are able to join these classes to study. There is a varying attitude to acceptance of under 16s on these courses, so if one centre is unhelpful it is worth trying any others in

your area. There are also very different attitudes to paying for access to these courses – you may be asked to pay the full course fee, a subsidised course fee or no fee at all. Sometimes under 16s have more success accessing a GCSE course that is not being offered at school, e.g. Law or Psychology, rather than core subjects such as Maths or English which it is assumed all under 16s have access to at school.

If a student can enrol on an evening class for a GCSE subject they will be registered as a student at that centre and the centre will arrange for coursework authentication and marking, and for exam entry.

*When C began treating her ponies with herbal remedies, it looked as though she might like a career as a medical herbalist. She enrolled for GCSE English and Maths (in one year) at evening classes at the local FE college. There wasn't much support as these were re-sit classes but C passed both. The next year, age 18, C enrolled full-time for A level Chemistry and Biology (without the GCSE qualifications) and GCSE Physics. The enrolling lecturer had not heard of missing out the GCSE stage! Having passed GCSE Physics C took A level Physics the next year, as well as AS Applied Maths. C is now in the third year of an honours degree in Environmental Chemistry.*

**Studying in school** – some home educators have successfully arranged flexible attendance at a local school to enable home educated young people to attend a GCSE course without being registered at the school. The student is included in all the school's assessment arrangements but has to pay the exam entry fee. There may or may not be a course fee charged.

**Studying at private/independent schools or colleges** - students may attend evening or day classes at private/independent schools/colleges. Some private establishments will offer home educators flexible attendance arrangements and will accept exam entries from private candidates for subjects that they are offering their students. Some provide short, intensive courses for revision and retakes of standard qualifications.

## INTERNATIONAL GCSEs

IGCSEs are designed for overseas students wanting to achieve British GCSE qualifications and are widely available in many countries. In the past many home educated young people in the UK took IGCSE qualifications as the 100% exam-based assessments removed the difficulties associated with arranging

coursework marking and practical exams. Since 2003 there has been very limited availability of these qualifications to private candidates in the UK.

Cambridge IGCSEs are now only available to candidates who are registered as students at a CIE centre. The Little Arthur Independent School on the Isles of Scilly provides the facility for registered pupils to study at home but enables candidates to sit IGCSE exams at the Little Arthur exam centre.

London Examinations IGCSEs, administered by Edexcel International, are available to private candidates in UK but only at a limited number of centres. The Cambridge Centre for Sixth Form Studies will accept entries from private candidates but numbers are limited and early application is recommended. Exams Together Ltd plan to provide centres in London and Manchester for May 2005, with further venues planned for future years.

## USEFUL CONTACTS

### Awarding Bodies

**AQA** (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance) [www.aqa.org.uk](http://www.aqa.org.uk) A range of subjects are available to private candidates, coursework marking can be arranged directly with AQA.

A catalogue of course specifications, past papers and marking schemes, and an order form are available from AQA Publications Dept., AQA Logistics Centre, Unit 2, Wheel Forge Way, Ashburton Park, Trafford Park, Manchester M17 1EH. Tel: 0870 410 1036 or email: [publications@aqa.org.uk](mailto:publications@aqa.org.uk)

The catalogue, order form and many other items are also available for downloading on the website [www.aqa.org.uk](http://www.aqa.org.uk)

AQA produce information for private candidates, including how to enter, entry closing dates, coursework arrangements and a list of AQA Centres that may accept private candidates. Candidates can email their questions to the private candidate mailbox and someone will get back to them usually within 24 hours - [privatecandidates@aqa.org.uk](mailto:privatecandidates@aqa.org.uk)  
To speak to someone in Exams Office Support (Manchester Office) the number is 0870 410 1036

**Edexcel** [www.edexcel.org.uk](http://www.edexcel.org.uk) A limited number of GCSE subjects available to private candidates – Maths and foreign languages. Subject specifications, past papers and other publications can be ordered through the Edexcel Publications Dept., Adamsway, Mansfield, NG18 4FN 01623 467467 or via the Edexcel website [www.edexcel.org.uk](http://www.edexcel.org.uk)

Information for private candidates can be obtained from Edexcel, Stewart House, 32 Russell Square, London, WC1 5DN 0870 240 9800, ask for Private Candidates Section email: [Privatecandidates@edexcel.org.uk](mailto:Privatecandidates@edexcel.org.uk)

**OCR** (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA examinations) [www.ocr.org.uk](http://www.ocr.org.uk) Only accepts private candidate entries through an OCR centre. No information provided for private candidates. 1 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB1 2EU. 01223 553998

**WJEC** (Welsh Joint Education Committee) [www.wjec.co.uk](http://www.wjec.co.uk) Entry forms for private candidates are available on request. These need to be signed by the head of the exam centre that is accepting your entry and returned to WJEC. 245 Western Avenue, Cardiff, CF5 2YX. Telephone: 029 2026 5000

**CCEA** (Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (Northern Ireland)) [www.ccea.org.uk](http://www.ccea.org.uk) 29, Clarendon Road, Belfast, Northern Ireland, BT1 3BG. 028 9026 1200

**SQA** (Scottish Qualifications Authority) [www.sqa.org.uk](http://www.sqa.org.uk) Hanover House, 24, Douglas Street, Glasgow, G2 7NQ. 0845 279 1000 Scottish National Qualifications have 2 levels equivalent to GCSEs and A levels – Standard and Higher – and these courses are offered in schools and colleges in Scotland as daytime and evening courses. Candidates in Scotland can take GCSEs administered by the English awarding bodies but be aware that examining centres accepting AQA or Edexcel entries may be harder to find in Scotland.

**CIE** (Cambridge International Examinations) [www.cie.org.uk](http://www.cie.org.uk) Awarding body for Cambridge IGCSEs – British GCSE equivalent qualifications, recognised world-wide. Entries only accepted from students registered on courses at CIE registered centres.

**Edexcel International** [www.edexcel-international.org](http://www.edexcel-international.org) Awarding body for London Examinations IGCSEs, 100% exam based assessment qualifications. Publications available from Edexcel International Publications, Adamsway, Mansfield, Notts., NG18 4LM 01623 450781 email: [intpublications@linneydirect.com](mailto:intpublications@linneydirect.com) or from the website.

### Courses

See list of useful contacts in ‘Courses and Qualifications’ leaflet

### Exam Centres

**Little Arthur Independent School**, St.Martins, Isles of Scilly, Cornwall, TR25 0QL 01720 422457. Offers courses and exam facilities for Cambridge IGCSEs to registered students.

**Cambridge Centre for Sixth Form Studies** (CCSS) 1 Salisbury Villas, Station Road, Cambridge, CB1 2JF. 01223 716890 Independent sixth form college accepts exam entries from private candidates, including London Examination IGCSEs

**Exams Together Ltd** [www.examstogether.com](http://www.examstogether.com) 8 Astley House, Cromwell Business Park, Chipping Norton, OX7 5SR. 01 608 645455 email: [regn@examstogether.com](mailto:regn@examstogether.com)

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