

When our eldest reached fourteen we decided to start thinking about GCSEs. We had no idea what it entailed, but mistakenly thought it would be pretty straightforward. We left it all very last minute as we did not want GCSEs to be dominant in our home education for years and years.

We have never had a very good relationship with the LEA because we felt they were only ever checking up on us, not that they were interested in helping. We thought we'd ask other home-educators first. We joined the GCSE home-ed yahoo group and asked for advice as to where to start, and were advised to find an exam centre first, so we started this straight away.

I emailed all the local schools and was really shocked and concerned when they all said, 'No, we won't accept private candidates.' Then the last school replied and said, 'yes.' What a relief. But they did specify that our son could only sit exams that their own pupils were taking.

The most helpful advice was that it was crucial to find a centre and work out what you could actually do, before investing time and money on exams that you might simply never be able to sit. In other words, not diving in to do what suited you/looked good until you worked out the end-game. Also, the advice that many GCSEs were not possible, and that we'd have to consider IGCES, which we'd never even heard of. Finally, advice about how to navigate exam boards that can be very daunting when you are just getting started and it can be very hard to understand even the most basic information about what your child needs to know. All this advice came from other home educators on the yahoo group.

My son took 2 GCSEs aged 14, then six more age 15. We didn't think about asking the local FE college. We were lucky with costs. The school only charged £25 per exam plus £25 admin.

We couldn't afford tutors or correspondence courses so we just bought textbooks and did it ourselves.

We panicked and bought books we didn't need; we entered him at the last minute and had only a few months to do the work. We didn't realise how 'short' the academic year really is. You think you have a year, but you don't. If you get going by mid-September, and leave April-May for revision, you have about 24 weeks and it isn't much!

So, I think that if you are going to do exams you might as well get sorted out earlier and make it less stressful. I don't think there's any need to wait until 14-16, if you know you are going to go down the GCSE route.

Our son decided to apply to the 6th Form of the same school where he had taken the exams. The school said he needed GCSEs/IGCSEs.

Our second son has registered with the Open University and hopefully he will be able to continue with them to a higher level without needing GCSEs, though he is planning to sit half a dozen or so just to say he has them or in case the OU falls through and he ends up having to apply to 6th Form/college.