

Our tale with exams began when our eldest daughter was 12 and she still stated that she wanted a certain future career, that we knew would require specific qualifications to achieve, so we started to think about how to obtain and sit exams as external candidates.

Our children having never been to school, I asked our local L.A about how home educated children took exams, as no one in our local home education groups or area that we knew of had been down this pathway before. We have a good long standing relationship with our L.E.A and I asked them about how home educated children took exams as external candidates, as during their visits over the years they had always asked us if the children had any thoughts on taking qualifications.

To my surprise, despite annually asking us about thoughts on taking prospective exams they had no knowledge of how home educators could actually achieve this!!! No idea where there were any exam centres, a list of tutors, or costs.....nothing. They knew of no other h.e children they visited who had sat exams in their area or how we could go about it!

We were utterly on our own.

We started to research on line courses, the cost seemed expensive but we felt we had no choice - our eldest started a maths on line basic GCSE course, but we still had to find an exam centre at the end of it and arrange that ourselves. I couldn't find one and the N.E.C course wasn't very unhelpful in pointing us in the right direction about exam centres or procedures, only repeating that it was our responsibility to find an exam centre, not theirs to provide one. So we continued the work on the on line course by ourselves and gave up hope of finding a centre for it, just using the maths as experience.

We looked at centres like, Kip and McGrath in our areas, tutors who advertise that they help children prep for exams. They do at a large fee, but don't book or arrange the exams themselves. Another dead end.

Every school and college in the area that I phoned refused us entry. I even tried the adult education courses, but they wouldn't hear of it. I offered to enrol on the course beside her as a student and take the exam too, they wouldn't listen - said it would lower the moral of their students if a child was sitting in the room studying.

In the end I had to look outside of our county to find a home education group that have a good working relationship with their L.A and found a H.E study group, which we joined, who have a friendly relationship with a small private school, where H.E children could arrange to sit exams as external candidates. Our prayers had been answered. I can remember that day as a ray of sunshine!

By now my eldest was 13. The H.E group had set up a parents co-op group to help children prep and work towards exams, meeting only one morning a week in a hired community village hall.

Luckily for us the drive there is no more than 60 miles away, but it is worth the travel for us.

All us H.E parents volunteer, pooling resources and talents. Those that are ex teachers, professors or have a skill or passion in a topic - teach, others help set up, make teas/juices and biscuits for the group, car park monitors, take down and put up tables and chairs, treasurer, resource orders, exam certs giver and exam booker etc.

It is a small vibrant giving H.E community. There is a small termly group fee asked of each family to pay for the hire of the hall, use of facilities and printing expenses, but that is nominal compared

to actual tutors fees or on line courses.

We pay for our own text books which the group will order if you require or sometimes older students sell on after finishing exams, printing of past exam papers is often included in the fees, unless you can help cut costs and print them out for yourself.

Currently the range of exam lessons on offer is English, Maths, Chemistry and Biology. The groups student ages range from 7 - any age. The younger siblings have smaller lessons on English, maths, History and C.D.T whilst their older siblings sit lessons in the exam subjects covered above. Exams are taken when the child is ready for the subject.

When my daughter's started there they were 13, 11 and 8. The eldest two went into the exam prep lessons and my youngest into her interest lessons. No-one is obligated to do any lesson they don't wish to or take exams, the choice is always the child's.

After a year of prep in Maths my eldest was ready for her first Module IGCSE maths exam at age 14. My middle daughter sat her first maths module exam aged 12. They sat their three maths modules over the year, taking re-sits as they saw fit.

We paid for each exam module as it came along at base rate cost (£56 per paper), often paying three months in advance, giving photocopied passport details, paper work and exam fees in to the group leader, who put all the candidates in together in waves of groups at the private school.

The children sat the exam in a small church hall along with private school student candidates. Parents of the home ed study group are asked to volunteer to be invigilators for exams their children aren't sitting to cut down costs of paying for private invigilators. We all take turns and help out with childcare along the way.

So far my two older daughters have sat Maths, English and Biology higher IGCSE's with the out of county home ed study group. The good thing about sitting as an external candidate is that you can sit exams often in Jan, March, May, June and Nov depending on exam boards and you can re-sit if unhappy with any final marks.

As we have grown in confidence with exams we have sorted out shared tutors with another group of home ed parents for Environmental Management IGCSE which our eldest sit this May, other Igcse's we have in the pipeline are Human Biology and Ancient Classical Civ yet to come.

Along with another H.E family I teach English Lit for an up and coming IGCSE exam in Jan 2013. Booking our exams through the home ed study group for the private school. Lots of other families do the same and some of the exams I know children have sat in past with the group are R.E, Law, Geography, Human Biology, History, Physics, English Lit, the choice is yours if you can facilitate it and the exam board covers it.

We share past exam papers and links, tutors, book sources and ideas. There are always small study groups forming and setting up for different exam goals. Again we pay a base rate fee for the exam entrance and paper work.

The thing that we learnt from our experience taking exams is that IGCSE's are easier for the H.E community to take rather than GCSE, which need modular coursework marking, which is an extra expense and hassle.

Make sure you have an exam centre before you start an on line course or exam. Check the exam

websites such as Edexcel, AQA and Cambridge - for the syllabus, see if you can teach it yourself to cut costs, you'll be surprised how easy it is to follow, or share a tutor once a week with other families. Text books are easy to find on Amazon and finally start thinking early when setting up exams, it takes a lot of preparation to get things rolling.

The next challenge was A levels. This has proved the hardest task of all in the exam world.

My daughter's didn't wish to give up work they have already put into IGCSE's for A levels as none of the topics they wish to study at A level are available in our local colleges, not even within a 60 mile travelling distance.

They see no point in studying topics for two years that they have no interest in. They want to tailor their education to the careers they desire. This then has been my challenge. The private school we currently sit IGCSE's with don't do A levels as they have no sixth form. No other sixth form in my area would take external candidates.

The problem - coursework marking for the AS and A levels. I have found one centre again out of county, but the other side this time who will allow us to sit as external A level candidates, but it comes at a hefty price and we have to find a way to get the coursework marked ourselves, at another monetary cost. This is without buying the on line course at a cost of hundreds of pounds.

We worked out to get 1 A level as an external home study student would cost us Â£800 or there about's!! As my daughter's want to go to Uni, we had to find a solution.

My older two are still taking IGCSE's of their choice, but have also entered the Open University via the Young Applicants. This was the ONLY thing the L.A could suggest during all my liaison with them about exams, and only because they had heard of others doing so out of county and they thought it was worth us giving it a 'shot'!

Our eldest was first to apply for a short level 1 undergraduate course in Archaeology for Â£179. There are no exam centres to contend with at the end of the course, just a computer submitted exam paper at the end. There is help with an on line tutor but we hired our own once every few weeks for the 5 month course.

To apply for this O.U course we had to get the L.E.A to write a recommendation of our daughter's educational status, former tutors wrote references for us, she herself had to write a letter about why she wanted to study this course and where she wanted it to lead her in a future career, we as her parents had to write a letter of how we proposed to support her through the course.

The O.U then spoke to my daughter and asked her questions over the phone about her education, past qualifications were submitted and she had to submit a test essay from a question set by her prospective tutor of their choosing against the subject she wished to study.

Then there was a chance that if the essay wasn't up to notch there may be a face to face interview. It was a lot of hoops to jump through, but easier than A levels as an external candidate! There were a lot of forms to fill out as she was under age and could not represent herself.

She didn't need an interview in the end as her essay was passed by her prospective tutor for entrance and at aged 15 she was accepted on to the Open University as a young applicant undergraduate student last year. She went on to pass her Archaeology level 1 with flying colours.

Later she wants to go to land Uni to study for a final degree of her choosing and after speaking to

her prospective land Uni tutors, we asked what we could do to bypass A levels for entry. They advised staying on with the Open University and studying for certain courses that they (the land Uni degree course) recommended and would accept as entrance requirements.

Our eldest, now at aged 16 is studying more Open University undergraduate courses up to level 2 as entry requirements for land Uni. She does not have to gain the final O.U degree or qualification, studying the modules is enough say her land Uni prospective tutors as alternative entrance. For this as she is studying over a level 10 course and she is under age she gets full funding, which if she doesn't qualify as a degree, we are assured by the O.U and Student Loans, won't affect her future funding for land Uni.

Daughter number two was accepted at aged 14 by the O.U as a young applicant student and starts her undergraduate level 1 course this coming May. She hopes to follow a similar route to land Uni as her older sister, bypassing A levels.

What the future holds for our baby girl, now aged 11, is yet to be seen. She is nearly ready to move up to the exam prep lessons if she wants to. Again the choice is hers and it will be interesting to see where she wants her journey to take her.

I took the head of our L.A to view the out of county H.E study group and set up meetings for them to learn about how exam centres can be used for the home ed community. They still haven't done anything. They still haven't set up any exam centres or links for H.E students in our county and as far as I am aware have no future intention to do so.

This year after four years of sharing meetings, emails, chats with local MP's and L.A's they are no further forward then they were when we first asked them for help all those years ago. The local L.A now pass my home phone number to other local H.E families if they wish to sit exams.

As a H.E family we have no idea what the next step will be or if the land Uni will uphold their word to daughter number 1 that the O.U modules and IGCSE's will be entrance requirement enough.