

Courses and Qualifications

This leaflet outlines some of the options available to home educating families, both for under 16s and for over 16s, and aims to encourage families to think 'outside the system'. The information here is not exhaustive, but might be useful as a starting point, and is liable to change from time to time.

There are many ways in which home educated children can become successful adults, irrespective of their approach to education. This may be via courses and qualifications or more directly by employment/self-employment. Whatever approach is adopted though, home education affords the opportunity for each child to develop in his or her own unique way.

There are many factors to consider when choosing a programme of study - such as individual interests, abilities, and aptitudes (including any special needs or different styles of intelligence), whether a child has developed learning anxieties and so requires an informal approach to boost confidence, and the desired future direction. Home educators find children have the opportunity to take courses at their own pace, perhaps taking a smaller number at a time, spread out over several years, and they may set about the task in a variety of ways.

Many people believe that the only way to success in further or higher education and employment is via GCSE qualifications. Home educated young people often find that access to further/higher education or to employment is more flexible than generally supposed. It is useful to check what qualification requirements there may be for a particular career path, but home educated young people can often access FE/HE courses or employment without fulfilling the specified requirements and find they are able to achieve good results.

Anna, having attended school for only a year at age 8, was educated at home informally until, aged 17, she decided that she would like to experience a more formal approach to studying. Anna found a course at her local art college that she wanted to do - a National Diploma in Media Production (equivalent to 2 A levels) - but entry requirements listed were 5 GCSEs. She had no formal qualifications so put together a portfolio of relevant projects she had undertaken in the preceding few years, including several testimonies from tutors of vocational courses she had undertaken. The admissions office were not sure that she could apply but after speaking to the course tutor she was asked to attend for an interview, at which she was offered a place immediately. Anna

achieved high grades during the 2 year course and gained a place on a Communications Studies degree course.

Instead of formal qualifications, educational establishments and employers would be interested to see a CV and/or a portfolio of relevant projects or interview an applicant. A 'portfolio' is an excellent way of showing an individual's level of knowledge and skill and would include examples of projects/work undertaken by the young person. A CV which demonstrates a diverse range of interests, skills and experiences, would be particularly striking to prospective employers or education establishments. It is also useful to display initiative by approaching organisations to discuss opportunities, and to offer proposals, before jobs or places are even advertised.

Remember that colleges and employers may not have dealt with a home educated applicant before and parents may need to educate them about the benefits of an alternative educational experience. A college admissions office may not have the authority to accept an applicant who doesn't meet the specified course requirements, but ask to speak to the head of the college or the course tutor who will usually be more open to accepting a motivated self-directed learner onto a course.

Many parents report that children usually find it unnecessary to take a structured step-by-step path by way of preparation for undertaking courses. Some courses *do* require prior knowledge or qualifications but many others, including GCSEs, NVQs, even A levels and degrees, are complete in themselves and may be taken by students from diverse educational backgrounds as long as they can demonstrate they are capable of studying for that level. Assessment is based on material studied throughout the course itself.

VOCATIONAL COURSES

Vocational/special interest courses are available in a massive range of subjects e.g. music, dance, art, crafts, sports, history, languages, etc. and are accessible by home educated young people. These are offered by adult education centres (sometimes they like a young person to be accompanied by an adult), specialist music, dance or drama centres, on the internet and by correspondence courses, to name a few. These courses might not lead to formal qualifications

but could form a valid part of a young person's CV/portfolio. It might be useful at the end of a course with no formal 'result' for a parent to ask the tutor if they could write a short letter to indicate the student's attendance/completion of the course, their input/participation and the progress they have made. Such testimonies can provide an independent assessment of the student, their motivation and level of achievement which would be supportive of future applications for a higher level course or employment in the absence of any formal qualifications.

ENTRY LEVEL COURSES

Many of the awarding bodies offer over 100 Entry level Certificates in a wide variety of national curriculum and vocational subjects. These are flexible, individually tailored qualifications aimed at students who would find it difficult to reach GCSE levels of achievement, or might be useful to those requiring an extra step towards formal qualifications. More information is available from QCA and the individual examining bodies, although at the time of writing there is no information concerning access to these courses for students not registered at school.

GCSEs

These are the most common qualifications obtained by students under 16. They are accessible to home educated young people in a number of ways (see GCSE leaflet). 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 GCSEs, to take them all at the same time or to take them at age 16.

VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS (VQs)

A wide range of vocational qualifications cover almost every industry sector, at many levels. These qualifications may be useful options for home educated young people when they reach school leaving age.

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are work-related, competence-based qualifications and reflect the skills and knowledge needed to do a job effectively. NVQs are a popular way for students to gain qualifications while working and are available to everyone. There are no formal entry

qualifications, although the higher level NVQs require more experience. There are no time limits. As long as you can demonstrate sufficient competence in the area you have chosen, you can be awarded an NVQ. NVQs are assessed at the candidate's place of work, not by written exams. NVQs can be taken by school and college students who have a work placement or part-time job or by people in employment. These courses are usually only offered to under 16s by schools who are able to disapply parts of the National Curriculum (under section 96 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000) and offer external courses to those students who would benefit from a more work-based learning programme. Funding would be provided by the LEA or the LSC for an approved qualification. No information is available at the time of writing as to the availability of such courses to under 16s not registered at school. A young person interested in such a path might be able to access NVQs via Connexions.

J is dyslexic (diagnosed in first year of his degree) and left school aged six. He didn't read until he was 12, preferring practical activities around the house and farm. Age 18 he enrolled at an FE college for a short multi-skills course, from which he could choose to specialise in site/bench joinery, plastering, bricklaying, painting and decorating or plumbing. J gained Bench Joinery NVQ III and Signwriting NVQ II. After 4 years in a factory job J enrolled on a BSc (Hons) in Architectural Design Technology, which consisted mainly of building technology, computer aided architectural design and model-making. He graduated in October 2004.

General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) are work-related courses in subjects like business, art and design, hospitality and engineering. As well as covering the knowledge and skills vital to the chosen subject, they give a good understanding of an area of work and help students to develop the skills needed in higher education and in employment. GNVQs are scheduled for withdrawal between June 2005 and 2007. They will be replaced by BTEC qualifications, OCR National Certificates, City and Guilds qualifications and GCSEs in vocational subjects.

Vocational GCSEs and Vocational A levels provide experiences and education relevant to working life but do not provide training for a specific job. Assessment is by coursework and a written exam. No information about access to

these courses for home educated young people is available at the moment.

A LEVEL COURSES are widely recognised as preparation for entry to higher education or for employment, however, many home educated young people are known to have accessed higher education without A levels, with only AS levels or with only 1 or 2 A levels. Some subjects would require a student to have studied to GCSE or equivalent level, but many subjects do not require any prior knowledge. A levels are accessible in a wide variety of ways and home educated students often access A level courses without a relevant GCSE.

WORK-BASED LEARNING

Helen chose to become home educated when she started secondary school and suffered from bullying. Helen and her parents were concerned how she was going to access GCSEs etc, and how it was going to affect her future. Helen had always wanted to work as a veterinary nurse and had been told that she would need GCSEs to gain a place on a college veterinary nursing course. Aged 13 Helen began working one day a week at the local boarding kennels to improve her knowledge of animal care. After a frustrating time trying to access affordable GCSE courses, Helen (age 14) studied an Animal Care course through Home Study College (a division of Stonebridge Associated Colleges). This was done on an open learning basis and Helen gained a Diploma in Animal Care. She also started working voluntarily one day a week at the local veterinary practice and soon found herself doing a huge variety of work. After 6 months (age 15) she was offered a job at the veterinary practice. Now she faced the problem of how much work home educated young people can do whilst they are of 'compulsory school age'. After many discussions with the LEA, she managed to arrange that she worked the maximum number of hours a week that someone of 'compulsory school age' can work, and the remaining hours are viewed as work experience. This is perfectly legal, and the LEA is happy with this arrangement as long as she can continue to prove that her learning is suitable for her age, ability and aptitude. She is now studying another open learning course in Equine Health through Equi Study (a division of Warwickshire College) which relates very well to her work as a veterinary assistant.

Entry to Employment (e2e) is a new programme, introduced 2003/4 for 16- to 18-year-olds, which is accessed through Connexions. Young people follow individual programmes to consolidate their skills. Programmes are different lengths, to suit individuals and could include vocational qualifications and/or NVQ level 1.

Foundation modern apprenticeships are for school and college leavers from the age of 16 wanting to start a career in industry or business.

They offer training to industrial standards with a focus on NVQ level 2. The apprenticeships are developed by employers to equip young people with a range of broad work skills. A training agreement sets out what is expected of the employer and the young person. The length of training depends on the young person's needs and the progress made. Most young people working towards a modern apprenticeship are employed and paid a wage.

Advanced modern apprenticeships are open to young people aged 16 to 24; they are the main work-based training option for those aged 19+ and are widely available across industry and commerce. They offer young people a balanced and structured training programme and provide an opportunity for young people to develop the high-level skills and qualities needed to become the technicians and managers of tomorrow. Most advanced modern apprentices are employed and are paid.

ACCESS TO COLLEGE COURSES

There is wide variation in access to courses at colleges for under 16s throughout the country. Colleges may accept students aged 13-16 years at the discretion of the Principal, for full and part-time courses, and this is an increasingly common way for home educated students to extend their studies and acquire exam passes. An increasing number of colleges also operate open learning packages which suit some home educated students as most of the work is done at home, with weekly visits to see the tutor in college.

Under current funding procedures, LEAs fund education for under 16s and the Learning Skills Council (LSC) funds over 16s. It is possible for an LEA or the LSC to fund an under 16 in college, but this is in special circumstances, usually for a young person excluded from mainstream schooling or for whom section 96 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000 has been used to disapply part of the National Curriculum in favour of a course not provided in school. Elective home education rarely receives the same funding. Parents may offer to pay course fees themselves, but even then some colleges will not accept younger students for fear of setting a precedent, and they are also concerned about the cost of providing any learning support required.

A few families have been able to access courses at college for an under 16, and have been able to secure funding for that course, although usually

after much negotiation/communication with the college, LEA and LSC. If you feel that a college based course is the best option for your under 16 year old don't take no for an answer first time round, and keep pointing out to people that government says that it wants to provide education for 14-19 olds that they find accessible. Funding has successfully been accessed from the LEA, the LSC, and from various special access funds, even if many college administrators don't know it can be. Keep trying different people and making the ethical case for education to be provided for your child, that your child is willing and able to access, until you find someone who will show you how the system can be used to make it possible.

It might be helpful to access Trevena Whitebread's research project 2003/04 (available on the EO web site under "research papers") investigating college and university admission for home educated children, which shows how successful this is.

Remember that college staff may not have dealt with a home educated student before and may need educating themselves about home education. They may also want reassurance that the young person will be able to cope with the social and academic environment at the college.

USEFUL CONTACTS

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) Information on accredited, nationally recognised general and vocational qualifications. Customer Services, 83, Piccadilly, London, W1J 8QA. 0207 509 5556 www.qca.org.uk 020 7509 5555

www.openquals.org.uk QCA database of accredited qualifications

Open and Distance Learning Quality Council. A national body which deals with the accreditation of open and distance tuition. Database of distance learning courses available and providers. Wide range of courses listed including GCSEs. www.odlqc.org.uk 020 7612 7090

Apprenticeships www.apprenticeships.org.uk

NVQs www.dfes.gov.uk/nvq/

Connexions www.connexions.gov.uk provides info on all Connexions services, and access to confidential advice and support for young people. Local area numbers are listed in The Phone Book.

National Extension College Variety of distance learning courses including GCSEs and A levels. Discount for EO members – see EO newsletter for

details. The Michael Young Centre, Purbeck Road, Cambridge, CB2 2HN 01223 400350 www.nec.ac.uk

Open Learning Centre International Good range of subjects available by distance learning. Enrolled students can arrange to sit exams at the OCLI exam centre in Camarthen. 24 King Street, Carmarthen, SA31 1BS www.olcinternational.com (0800 393743)

Open College of Arts Arts-based courses in 15 subject areas, suitable for complete beginners to degree level. www.oca-uk.com Freepost, Barnsley S70 6BR (01226 730 495)

Mercers College, Ware, Herts. SG12 9BU (01920 465 926) Specialises in full-time courses for pupils of school age.

World-wide Education Service (WES) Nursery, primary and secondary courses for children 3 – 13 years living all over the world. www.weshome.demon.co.uk Waverley House, Penton, Carlisle, CA6 5QU 01228 577123

The European Academy for Christian Homeschooling (TEACH) The National Christian Schools' Certificate (NCSC) provides a graduated series of certificates equivalent to GCSEs and above. www.christian-education.org Maranatha House, Unit 5, Northford Close, Shrivenham, Swindon, SN6 8HL. 01793 783783.

The Open University. Under 18s can be enrolled in 'special circumstances'. OU have recently introduced a range of 'mini' courses that might be appropriate. www.open.ac.uk Customer |Contact Centre, PO Box 724, Milton Keynes, MK7 6ZS. 01908 653231

Internet-based courses. There are many courses available via the internet. Home educators have found the following organisations useful:

Sheffield College (<http://my.sheffcol.ac.uk>) offer online GCSE English and AS English Language and Literature. Courses start in September each year, for an exam in the following June.

www.homestudycollege.co.uk an extensive range of courses in over 20 key subject areas.

www.e-learn.com a vast choice of online distance learning courses

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