



# The home-educator's guide to Choosing GCSEs and A levels

## Introduction

With so many recent changes to general education courses, we have produced this guide to help you and your son or daughter\* to decide which courses to choose. We understand that there are many factors to consider when making your choices, such as which specification and subjects and whether your child has enough time to prepare for the exams. You'll also want to consider if the support provided is suitable for their needs.

This guide is intended to help to make these decisions by providing you with advice based on our experience (which spans more than five decades) and the new requirements of the general education reforms.

*\*When we use the term 'you' throughout this guide, we are using it to mean you as the parent or guardian and the young people involved.*

## Choosing the right course

Here are some questions to consider:

### Will the course get you to where you want to go?

If your child is preparing to go on to a specific further education course, always check with the college or university that the subjects they are choosing at GCSE or A level meet their entry requirements because these can vary between institutions. This will apply particularly to the requirement for practical endorsements for the A level sciences which we discuss later on.

Of course your child may not have a clear idea of where they want to go yet and that is absolutely fine. If they have a general idea about the career path they plan to journey along, the [National Careers Service](#) website is a great source of information. Your son or daughter might even want to try and speak to a potential future employer.

We've produced the first two in a series of [Career Tracks](#). Free, practical guides focusing on nursing and teaching. The guides will look at reasons for choosing a particular career area, the different routes into the profession, and the qualifications, qualities and skills you need to succeed.

### Will you find the subject interesting and at the right level?

To find out more, most of our courses have a free downloadable course sample for you to try the subject before you enrol, to determine whether the course is suitable. You can find these on the relevant course pages of [NEC's website](#).

You should also download the specification from the awarding body website to expand on what you'll learn during the course.

#### **Elliot**

##### **Home educated NEC GCSE and A level student**

*'I was home educated from the age of 11. Distance learning gave me the opportunity to choose the subjects I wanted to study, and allowed me to set my own timetables and plans for learning.*

*This allowed me to learn the way I wanted to, when I wanted to, and thus gave a greater degree of freedom. I chose NEC as it offered a wide range of subject options, provided a great degree of flexibility, had thorough and complete courses, and also had a good support network.*

*Take it seriously and make a commitment to your ambition. Good planning will help tremendously. I enjoyed learning new things and knowing that I was working towards a goal which for me was to attend university.'*

#### **Kathryn**

##### **Home educated NEC GCSE and A level student**

*'NEC's course notes are the best I have encountered. They're so thorough and well-written that even complicated topics are easy to understand.*

Check out the suggested entry requirements. For example, we recommend that for A level Biology you would need to have a GCSE Science (double award) or GCSE Biology (minimum grade C) or Intermediate GNVQ Science or a BTEC First in Science, and GCSE Maths or equivalent. This is to ensure that you have enough background knowledge to get the best out of the course.

## Is distance learning suitable for younger learners?

It can be, yes. To study at a distance you need to be motivated and organised. The flexibility means that you are in control of the timetable. This is why many people choose to study in this way in the first place, The standard NEC service is based on the student being proactive. This works well for a well organised and self motivated student.

For students and parents who need more structure and support, we have worked with past and current students and our tutors to develop a service designed to give an extra helping hand to our younger learners while leaving room for flexibility. The **Enhanced Service** is designed to keep parents informed every step of the way.

The service has many other features such as a personal learning plan, a mid-course review and reminders when work is due in. There is an additional fee for the **Enhanced Service** - you can find more information on our website.

## Have you got enough time to study this course?

A GCSE ,IGCSE or an AS level will take between 120 and 150 hours of study and a full A level around twice that. Over the course of an academic year, this works out to be around 5-6 hours per week for a GCSE or AS or 9-10 hours for a full A level, plus additional time to complete assignments. You also need to plan for any deadlines for coursework entry or final exam dates for the course.

*Distance learning gives you more opportunities to express yourself than learning in a classroom and you have as much time as you want to read around a subject. If anyone tells you that you can't study properly at home, don't believe them. You can get good results and take exams in just the same way as you can at school.'*

### Susie

#### Home educated NEC GCSE student

*'The decision to take formal qualifications from home was one my mum and dad and me made together.*

*When it came to choosing GCSE courses there were four things in particular that impressed us: the look of the courses - what they included and how they were presented; they lead to recognised qualifications from a respected exam board; I could sit the exams at a local exam centre; and the positive comments from NEC students.'*

### Ben

#### Home educated NEC GCSE student

*'Distance learning is a good option, but you need to be motivated to study.*

Please be aware that any dates we have provided for last exam sittings are based on information provided by the awarding bodies, which can change. We have seen some of the last exam dates being extended before - you should always make sure that you check these dates independently as they are not under NEC's control.

*NEC was my first experience of distance learning. It suited me as I was too ill to attend school, and it meant I could study at the pace I wanted and for a short period of time when I felt able to.'*

## What is the difference between the legacy specifications and the new specifications for A levels?

The specifications for GCSEs, IGCSEs and A levels are changing; these changes began in September 2015 and will continue in phases until 2018. Some subjects will have two courses with two different specifications running together: the old specification which we are calling the legacy specification and the new specification which we are identifying by the year it was first available for teaching. For example, we refer to the current spec of A level Religious Studies as the legacy specification and the new course as 'Religious Studies 2016'. The decision about which course to choose will depend on which year your child wants to take the exam. Please note that, for most subjects, it is not easy to transfer from the legacy specification to the new specification because the content will be different.

### Legacy Specifications

Legacy A levels were modular and could be taken in two stages: AS followed by A2, each providing a qualification in its own right.

### Reformed Specifications

The new specifications are designed to be linear. The new specifications are assessed at the end of the course. AS levels are still available, but they no longer count as part of the A level. The new A levels are graded in the same way as the legacy A levels (A\* - E) but they are likely to be tougher than the ones they replace with a greater focus on deep knowledge and more attention given to spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG).

## What is changing for GCSEs?

GCSEs are also changing, starting with new specifications for English Language, English Literature and Maths. These new specifications were examined for the first time in the summer of 2017.

The new GCSEs will have a focus on deeper learning which means developing a wider body of core knowledge. The grading will change to a numerical grade from 9 to 1 where 9 is the highest grade and 1 is the lowest, grade 4 is classed as equivalent to the old grade C and grade 5 is a strong pass. Grade 9 is not the same as an A\*, it is a new grade designed to recognise the very highest performing students. There will be fewer grade 9s than there are currently A\*s.

Both English Language and English Literature will have a stronger focus on reading and writing and spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG).

Maths will move away from single step to multi-step questions and have an increased focus on 'mathematical mastery' which is the ability to use mathematical reasoning and techniques to come to conclusions.

NEC has developed new courses for GCSE English Language, English Literature and Maths which are available to enrol on now.

NEC's GCSE courses in Psychology, Sociology and Law will all be examined for the last time in the summer of 2018. We are preparing new courses for Psychology and Sociology but Law will not continue as a GCSE after the last exam sitting in 2018. NEC's IGCSE courses in Business Studies, French, History and Spanish will also be examined until the summer of 2018, IGCSE Maths, English Language and English Literature will be examined until January 2018 and we are preparing replacement courses for all these subjects.

NEC's IGCSE courses in Biology, Chemistry and Physics will continue to be examined until January 2019 and there are no proposals yet to withdraw the specifications for IGCSE Combined Science and Geography. A new GCSE Astronomy course will be available in 2018.

## Why are these changes being made?

The legacy A level model, AS and A2, was introduced in 2000 and resulted in a surge of people gaining higher grades. This number has broadly continued to grow and the Government believes a new, more challenging A level specification is needed. Some academics have also argued that the modular A level format has led to young people arriving at university without some of the skills needed for undergraduate study, particularly around literacy and numeracy.

## What about retakes if I don't get the grades I'm hoping for?

The new linear specification will mean that the whole A level will need to be retaken. However, you will be able to carry forward marks gained in any internally assessed coursework.

## What about non-examination assessments?

Non-examination assessments (NEA) is the term given to any assessment that is not the exam. This affects a few A levels and one GCSE courses offered by NEC.

### A level coursework

**English Literature, English Language and History A levels** all have assessed coursework. As a registered exam centre in our own right, NEC can supervise, authenticate and mark the coursework for our own students. It will then be sent to the exam board for moderation. You can then enter for the exam through one of our partnership centres which is the most straightforward option. If you choose a different exam centre, NEC will need to enter you for the

### Sally

#### NEC Maths tutor

*I love maths! My aim is to pass the passion I have for my subject on to others, to support learning through flexible tuition – appreciating that each learner has different commitments, motivations and ways of learning.*

*I have a BSc and PhD from Leeds University as well as a PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education). I have taught for several years in schools (as deputy head of the maths department) and university. I am also an A Level examiner.*

exams and transfer your entry to the exam centre of your choice (Fees will apply).

### **A level science- Practical Endorsements**

**Biology, Chemistry and Physics A levels** all have an additional endorsement. The A level qualification is awarded on the written exams. For science subjects, you will be expected to use your understanding of practical theory to answer questions. You will have gained this knowledge through the core practicals within the course, which you will do at home using easily obtainable items or where this is not possible, online demonstrations including accessing the Open University's Open Science lab.

For some university programmes, like medicine, you will need to demonstrate practical skills as well as knowledge. In addition to the A level, they will be able to gain the practical endorsement to show this. This practical endorsement does not form part of the full A level, but is an additional grade that they can achieve.

### **GCSE English- Speaking and Listening Endorsement**

GCSE English has an optional speaking and listening endorsement. We ensure that our students have the opportunity to take the endorsement and can enter you at an exam centre which can provide the assessment.

You can get the GCSE qualification without the endorsement if you choose not to take it .

We ensure that our students have the opportunity to take these additional endorsements, and crucially, under the new NEA rules, we can enter you for your exams if you choose not to take the endorsement.

We are working on ways to make science practical and English speaking and listening elements more accessible to our students, but in the meantime, your son or daughter can gain

### **Jane**

#### **NEC Science tutor**

*I have taught for NEC since the late 1970s on maths, sciences and engineering courses and have also been a tutor for the Open University in technology. Each student has different goals and I aim to help everyone succeed. When students find themselves in difficulty with their course, I endeavour to show them clearly the way to reach the correct answer.*

*I have a Bachelor's degree in chemistry and engineering. I have conducted research in chemistry and engineering and have a PhD in the latter. I completed the adult teaching qualification Preparing to to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector (now called Education and Training Level 3).*

### **Alice**

#### **NEC English tutor**

*Passionate about books, language and learning, I am an experienced teacher of both English Language and English Literature.*

*My aim as a tutor is to help each of my students get the most they can out of their course, both in terms of academic success and in enjoyment of these wonderful subjects.*

*I am an A level examiner for a range of different exam boards. My academic qualifications*

these endorsements alongside an NEC A level or GCSE English at selected partnership exams centres in Fareham (English only) Brighthouse, Coventry and Oxford.

*include an MA in English Literature, a BA (Hons) in English Literature with Creative Writing and a PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education).*

## Other reliable sources of information?

[Ofqual GCSE and A level reforms](#)

Cambridge University Press [Exam Success Guides](#)

UK exam boards: [Edexcel](#), [AOA](#), [OCR](#) and [CIE](#)

## What other organisations say about NEC

“For students who need a flexible route to those essential GCSE and A level qualifications, the National Extension College is a hidden treasure and a superb option.”

  
**Mary Curnock Cook**  
Chief Executive  
UCAS

“The NEC is still a unique institution which enables many adults to acquire the qualifications and skills they need to lead happy and productive lives.”

  
Workers' Educational Association

  
**Ruth Spellman**  
Chief Executive  
WEA

“Both NEC and the OU were set up in the 60s to open doors to the many adults who had missed out on traditional education. We have continued to work together to promote widening participation particularly for part-time students, those people who the new government call “the left behind”. The OU has a great deal of respect for the work of the National Extension College.”



  
**Peter Horrocks**  
Vice Chancellor  
Open University