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A NORTH-SOUTH COMPARISON OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEMS: LESSONS FOR POLICY

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ESRI ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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Acronyms and abbreviations

BTEC	Business and Technology Training Council (Northern Ireland)
CAO	Central Applications Office (Ireland)
CCEA	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (UK)
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools programme (Ireland)
EA	Education Authority (Northern Ireland)
ETB	Education and Training Boards (Ireland)
EU-LFS	European Labour Force Survey
FET	Further education and training
FSM	Free school meals
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GUI	*Growing Up in Ireland* study
HEA	Higher Education Authority (Ireland)
IE	Ireland
ISEI	International Society on Early Intervention
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
MCS	Millennium Cohort Study
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (Ireland)
NEET	Not in employment, education or training
NI	Northern Ireland
NSC	Northern Ireland Skills Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate programme (Ireland)
PPP	Purchasing power parity
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RRCPL	Relative regional consumer price levels
SEN	Special educational needs
SCoTENS	Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South
STEM	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study draws on international and national survey data, administrative data, 31 interviews with 35 policy stakeholders and input from a consultation with stakeholders to document commonalities and differences between the education systems in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Remarkably, it is the first study to systematically compare the systems from primary to tertiary levels and it is hoped that the findings will provide insights for future policy learning in both jurisdictions. The study is timely given the independent review of education being conducted in Northern Ireland and ongoing reviews, especially at primary and upper secondary levels, in Ireland.

KEY FINDINGS

- There are marked differences in educational attainment between Ireland and Northern Ireland, with a lower proportion of the population in Ireland having the lowest levels of educational attainment.
- Restricting the analysis to younger age groups helps provide a better gauge for how the education and training system has been performing in more recent years, and also allows us to control for differences in underlying demographic structures. When we do so, the gaps in educational attainment remain.
- Ireland and Northern Ireland perform well in international comparisons of skill development at primary and secondary levels. The two jurisdictions have broadly comparable patterns of skill development and similar patterns are evident by social background, indicating comparable levels of inequality in skill development.
- However, there are marked differences in the extent of early school leaving between the two jurisdictions, with Northern Ireland experiencing over twice the level of early school leaving than Ireland. Furthermore, students from more disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be early school leavers in Northern Ireland than in Ireland. This highlights an important difference between the two systems, and it is likely that academic selection in Northern Ireland and the success of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme in Ireland in retaining students in education are strong contributory factors.
- Existing research studies and stakeholder interviews have highlighted the 'high stakes' nature of the assessment systems in both jurisdictions, as well as the role of the backwash effect in narrowing the range of skills and capacities developed by young people.
- In both Ireland and Northern Ireland, students from more disadvantaged backgrounds achieve lower grades at secondary level than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds. However, this inequality in exam grades is more marked in Ireland. While students from more disadvantaged

backgrounds in Northern Ireland are more likely to be early school leavers, disadvantaged students in Ireland are more likely to remain in secondary education but later achieve poorer exam grades in general.

- Expectations in terms of going on to higher education vary by social background in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. However, such expectations are significantly lower in Northern Ireland than in Ireland, even after adjusting for social background. This pattern is explained by a much lower level of expectation found among those in non-grammar schools in Northern Ireland, especially among males. The expectations of those in grammar schools in Northern Ireland are no higher than those in voluntary secondary schools (which have typically had an academic orientation) in Ireland. The issue of lower expectations among those from working-class backgrounds, particularly males, was also raised in the stakeholder interviews in Northern Ireland.
- The two systems differ in their approach to targeting educational disadvantage, though both focus on the provision of additional resources for schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged populations. The DEIS programme in Ireland was spoken of favourably on both sides of the border, though previous research has highlighted the absence of supports for disadvantaged children and young people attending non-DEIS schools. In Northern Ireland, additional resources for schools are not seen as being targeted in the same way, with a lack of connection between resourcing and specific supports or activities.
- Higher rates of return to education (measured in terms of the impact on wages) may incentivise individuals to invest more in their education and differences in wage rates are often an important component in explaining differences in rates of educational attainment. The study finds that the return to education in Ireland substantially exceeds that in Northern Ireland at all levels of educational attainment, which may suggest that productivity levels in Northern Ireland are considerably below those in Ireland.
- The two systems share some similarities in the orientation of secondary students towards higher education and the perceived 'second-best' nature of further education. The view that higher education and the labour market are the two main options for school leavers may be detrimental in the long-term for those who choose to leave education at this point.
- However, important differences occur across the two jurisdictions in terms of the configuration of post-school opportunities within the broader educational landscape. Stakeholders highlighted recent policy developments in Ireland they feel will help improve the perceived status of further education. Stakeholders in Northern Ireland emphasised the challenges of having a multiplicity of providers and duplication of courses.
- In both systems, stakeholders reported funding challenges in higher education. The chief difference between the two systems relates to the significant proportion of students (26%) from Northern Ireland who pursue higher education outside the jurisdiction, with most of these (almost two-thirds) failing to return after completion of their studies.

- Stakeholders in both Ireland and Northern Ireland commented on challenges in aligning provision with labour market demand.
- In terms of North–South contact and co-operation, many stakeholders highlighted a few examples of very good practice. Across the stakeholder interviews, common examples included the areas of teacher education through SCoTENs (Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South), strong links between the Inspectorates, the Middletown Centre for Autism, which is a joint North–South initiative, and the Joint Peace Fund. However, more generally, stakeholders highlighted that in many areas North–South links are ad hoc in nature and based on individual relationships or specific projects and initiatives, thus making sustained co-operation more challenging. Nonetheless, stakeholders reported a willingness to engage in co-operation around substantive issues.
- The fact that both jurisdictions face similar challenges in, among other factors, trying to counter educational disadvantage and create an inclusive educational system for students with special educational needs could provide a starting point for shared dialogue and learning.
- Both jurisdictions raised issues around the perceived (low) status of further education, which emerged as another area where collaboration and shared learning may be useful.

CHAPTER 1
Introduction

1.1 BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The Irish Government's Shared Island initiative has identified education as an important area with potential for more co-operation between Ireland and Northern Ireland.[1] This report was commissioned in order to provide a better qualitative and quantitative evidence base on the two education systems, in terms of their respective performance and common or connected policy concerns. Remarkably, this is the first systematic comparison of the two systems across the span of primary to higher education. In contrast to studies that emphasise the potential for policy borrowing, that is, transplanting an example of good practice from one system to another, this study explores the potential for policy learning (see Raffe and Semple, 2011).

Access to, and participation in, education is a key factor determining employment opportunities, career success, wage growth and broader life chances, such as health and well-being (Belfield and Levin, 2007). The effectiveness of the education and training system in enabling the acquisition of skills and qualifications matters not only for individuals but also for the economy and society. At a macroeconomic level, human capital plays a significant role in determining employment and productivity levels and ultimately macroeconomic growth rates (Bergin and Kearney, 2007). By contrast, early school leaving has a societal cost and is linked to unemployment, social exclusion and poverty (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). Therefore, it is essential to consider how the education and training system shapes pathways to qualifications.

McGuinness and Bergin (2020) have shown substantial gaps between educational attainment in Northern Ireland and Ireland. Furthermore, Bergin and McGuinness (2021) found that the rate of early school leaving in Northern Ireland was almost twice that of Ireland, with the analysis indicating that early school leaving there is much more heavily concentrated among males and those from working-class backgrounds. However, these broad comparisons do not explain the processes behind these figures or what groups (in terms of gender and social background) have particular types of qualifications. Despite the clear value of such a comparison, there has been very little research comparing the two education and training systems. This study aims to fill this gap by comparing the two systems, from primary to higher education, as a basis for policy learning.

[1] See https://merrionstreet.ie/en/news-room/speeches/online_address_by_an_taoiseach_on_shared_island.html.

In addressing the following research questions, this study provides new insights into the way the education and training systems in Ireland and Northern Ireland shape outcomes.

1. **What are the trends in educational attainment in the two jurisdictions?** How do overall educational outcomes (in terms of qualifications, exam performance and skills) compare across the two jurisdictions? To what extent are these outcomes differentially influenced by gender and social background?
2. **What are the skill levels among the two populations** from primary education to adult life? Is any mismatch evident between skills and qualifications?
3. **How do earnings and the relative returns to different levels of education compare** in Ireland and Northern Ireland?
4. **What aspects of the respective education and training systems shape differences** in terms of skills and qualifications? What lessons can be learned for the future?

The study is timely given the independent review of education currently being conducted in Northern Ireland, as well as the ongoing reviews, especially at primary and upper secondary levels, taking place in Ireland.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

Given the lack of comparative research on the education and training systems in Ireland and Northern Ireland, this study adopts a mixed methods research approach to develop a richer picture of the two education and training systems, from primary to tertiary levels, and any issues associated with them.[2] The report combines quantitative analysis of existing data, which provides insights into a range of educational outcomes, with in-depth qualitative interviews with key policy stakeholders in both systems. The latter seek to improve understanding of the way in which the specific nature of each system shapes the level of qualifications and skills and inequalities in educational outcomes. This also provides a greater understanding of how different aspects of the education and training systems are assessed from a range of points of view. This approach offers rich insights into the factors shaping the nature of the education and training systems and helps identify potentially important directions for policy.

The secondary data used come from a range of sources, which were selected on the basis of whether or not they covered the two jurisdictions and contained comparable information on Ireland and Northern Ireland (see Table 1.1 for details).

[2] An analysis of early years provision and adult/community education is outside the scope of the current study but could usefully provide the focus of future research.

The analyses are based on the most recent years for which data are available. The analyses are largely descriptive in nature comparing, for example, levels of skill development and the extent to which these vary by gender and family background. However, multivariate models are used to provide more direct comparisons of the scale of difference between the two jurisdictions, comparing like with like, in relation to outcomes such as educational expectations, early school leaving and pay levels.

TABLE 1.1 SECONDARY DATA USED IN THE REPORT

Name	Sample and year	Measures
European Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS)	15-64 year olds in IE and NI, 2005–2019	Educational attainment; % not in employment, education or training (NEET)
Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)	Adults (16-65 year olds) in IE and NI, 2011–2012	Educational attainment; % NEET; pay levels; literacy and numeracy test scores
Department of Education published data	GCSE and A-level students in NI, 2019	Levels of exam performance
State Examinations Commission micro-data	Junior and Leaving Certificate students in IE, 2019	Levels of exam performance
Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)	5 year olds in NI	Vocabulary test score and teacher-assessed skills
Growing Up in Ireland Study (GUI)	5 year olds in IE	Vocabulary test score and teacher-assessed skills
Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)	4th grade students (approx. 9-10 years) in IE and NI, 2016	Reading test scores
Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)	4th grade students (approx. 9-10 years) in IE and NI, 2019	Maths and science test scores
Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)	14 year olds in IE and NI, 2018	Reading, maths and science test scores; educational expectations

A range of stakeholders were invited to be interviewed for the qualitative part of the study. Stakeholders in Ireland and Northern Ireland were chosen from the areas of education policy and provision (including government departments, state agencies, school management bodies and teacher unions) and across the various sectors of education. In total, 31 interviews with 35 stakeholders were conducted by members of the ESRI research team, all of which were recorded and

transcribed.[3] The interviews followed a semi-structured format, with a range of questions helping to direct the interviews. The interviews investigated a number of themes, including main policy developments, contact and co-operation between different parts of the system, how well the education and training system prepares young people for the world of work and adult life, various dimensions of educational inequality, institutional issues around discretion to shape policies and practices, the frameworks for ensuring quality, and North–South contact and co-operation. The analysis began by identifying emerging themes, which were then examined in greater depth, with a focus on identifying both shared and diverging views across the main themes. The quotations from these interviews provided in this report were chosen to reflect both common perspectives and variations in opinions.

Following the above research stages, a consultation event was held at which initial findings were presented and feedback was sought from stakeholders.[4] This was an important step in the research process, helping to ensure findings were accurately interpreted and that the report portrayed the range of views across education stakeholders in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Given the scope of the study, it was not feasible to interview teachers, students or parents on their perspectives regarding educational provision in either of the two jurisdictions. However, the study does integrate findings from previous research, which drew on the student perspective in particular.

1.3 OVERVIEW OF THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEMS IN IRELAND AND NORTHEN IRELAND

Education in Ireland is compulsory for children between the ages of six to 16 years, or until they have completed three years of second-level (post-primary) education. In practice, however, most children start primary school before the age of six. In Northern Ireland, education is compulsory for children between the ages of four and 16.[5]

Both jurisdictions provide free pre-school education, but the two systems now differ significantly in terms of the timing of early years provision. In Northern Ireland, this is available to children in the year before they start primary school under the Pre-School Education Programme. In Ireland, children can participate in

3 Some interviews involved multiple stakeholders.
4 For more information, see https://www.esri.ie/events/shared-island-unit-education-consultation.
5 It should be noted that the School Age Bill passed the final stage in the Northern Ireland Assembly in February 2022, which gives more flexibility to parents/guardians with regards to the school starting age.

the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme when they are as young as two years and eight months of age, for a maximum of two years.

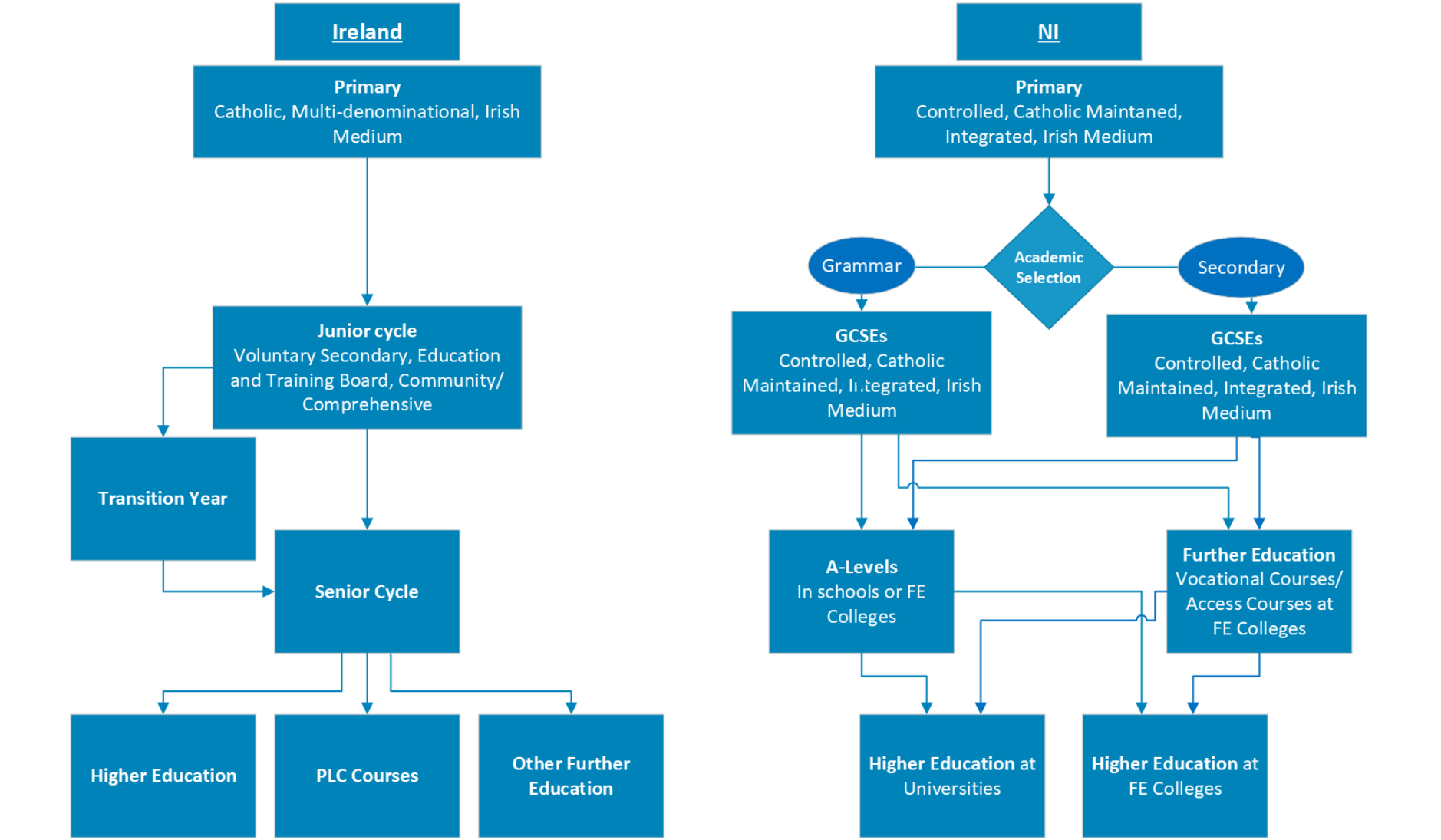
At both primary and secondary levels, Northern Ireland's school system is fragmented on the basis of school type and religious denomination. A range of school categories make up the system in Northern Ireland, including Controlled (many of which were originally Protestant schools), Catholic Maintained, Voluntary Grammar, Integrated, Irish-Medium and Independent schools.[6] Grant-aided schools follow the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum, which has a largely prescribed curriculum from four to 14 years, with greater flexibility and choice from 15 years onwards. Children attend primary school for seven years (from four to 11 years). Second-level education is provided in secondary schools or grammar schools. Entry to grammar schools is through academic selection and the results of transfer tests are used to determine places. At the end of compulsory education (16 years), students take their GCSE examination, after which those who stay in education study for a further two years, either for A-levels or vocational courses, in schools or further education colleges. Subsequent education pathways include further education and higher education.

In Ireland, primary and secondary systems are also typically structured around religious denomination. Primary schools are publicly funded but are generally privately organised and usually with Church (mostly Catholic) involvement in governance. Primary education consists of an eight-year cycle and students follow a national curriculum. There are three types of secondary school (voluntary secondary, Education and Training Board (ETB), and community/comprehensive) and all schools follow the same curriculum and qualifications framework. Following recent statutory change, secondary schools are now not permitted to assess students for entry. However, it is very common for students not to attend their nearest or most accessible school, with around half not doing so, most often in urban areas, indicating a strong degree of active school selection by parents and children, with the families that make more active choices tending to be more advantaged (Smyth et al., 2004). Second-level education comprises an initial three-year junior cycle, which has recently been reformed, and is followed by a two- or three-year senior cycle (depending on whether students take the optional one-year Transition Year course). In the final two years of the senior cycle, students can take one of three programmes (established Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme or the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme) and each

6 Controlled schools are managed and funded by the Education Authority through school boards of governors (including representatives of the Protestant churches in most cases). Catholic Maintained schools are managed by boards of governors nominated by trustees. For Voluntary Grammar schools, the board of governors is the employing authority. This is also the case for Integrated schools, which bring together both communities. Irish-medium schools span the controlled and maintained sectors. It should be noted there is a very small number of independent schools in Northern Ireland.

has a state examination at the end of the programme. Subsequent education pathways in both jurisdictions include further education and higher education. The education systems and the associated pathways are displayed in Figure 1.1.

FIGURE 1.1 EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND ASSOCIATED PATHWAYS



1.4 OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

The remainder of the report is structured as follows. Chapter 2 examines patterns in key education outcomes in the two jurisdictions, including overall education attainment, exam performance at secondary level and skills accumulated over the life course.[7] The chapter also examines the relationship between qualifications and skills and the relative returns to education and skills. Chapter 3 examines the emerging themes from the stakeholder interviews and the consultation event, and highlights both commonalities and differences between the educational systems of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the study findings and highlights implications for future North–South co-operation.

7 The secondary school systems differ in the use of terminology (e.g. post-primary, second-level) so the term 'secondary' is used throughout the report in accordance with international classification systems.

CHAPTER 2
Education outcomes

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on survey and administrative data to document three sets of outcomes in the two jurisdictions: overall educational attainment, that is, the highest educational level obtained; exam performance at lower and upper secondary levels; and the skills developed at different stages of the life course. All three dimensions are important in assessing educational outcomes. Qualification level has been found to be strongly associated with employment chances, job quality and pay levels (Müller and Gangl, 2003). Grades at a particular educational stage can determine access to the next educational level (e.g. from upper secondary to higher education) and play a role in shaping employment chances among school leavers, at least in some countries (Barnardi, 2003; Smyth, 2008). Looking at skill development, as measured by international comparative studies (such as the Programme for International Assessment (PISA), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)), provides insights into the kinds of competencies developed within educational systems (Dämmrich and Triventi, 2018).

Sections 2.2 to 2.4 of this chapter document patterns of qualifications, grades and skills respectively in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The emphasis is on comparing overall outcomes in the two systems but also on examining the extent to which these outcomes are differentially influenced by socio-economic background and gender. Section 2.5 examines the relationship between qualifications and skills (such as literacy, numeracy and digital skills) and the relative returns to education and skills.

2.2 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

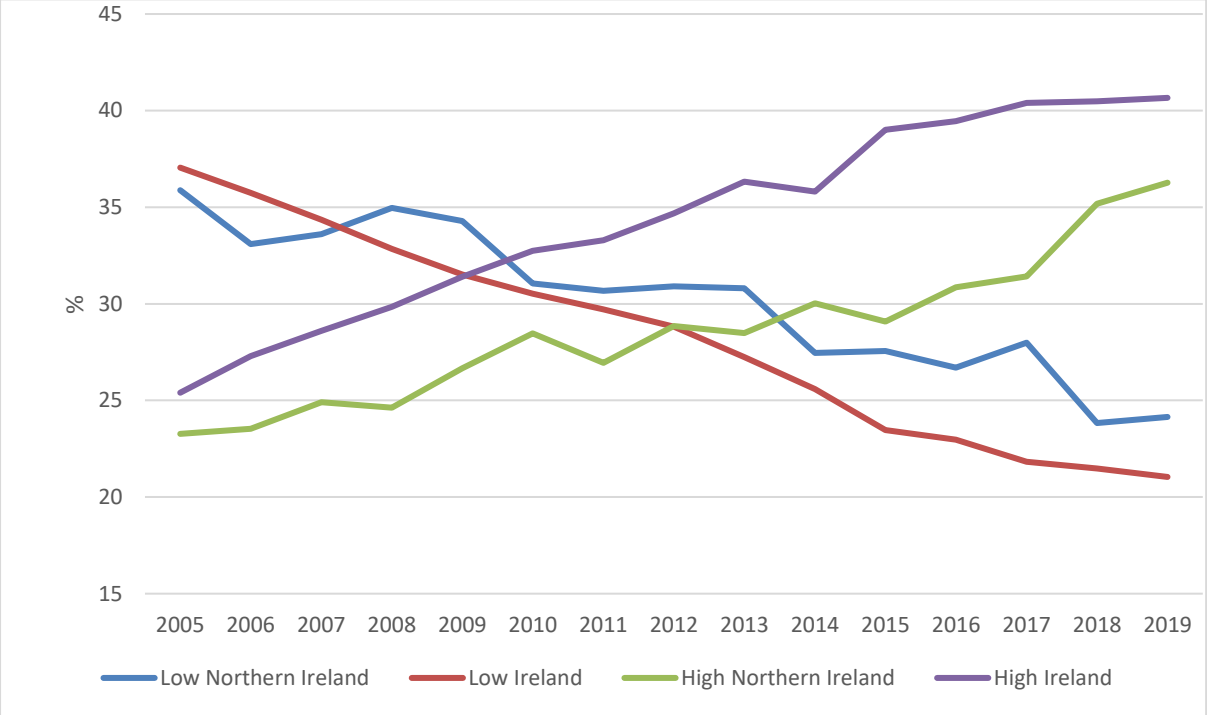
In this section we use several data sources to measure comparative rates of educational attainment both over time (based on EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) data) and at a specific point in time (based on Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) data). We then go on to assess the relative incidence of both early school leaving and of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

2.2.1 Patterns of educational attainment using the EU-LFS

Figure 2.1 uses data from the EU-LFS for Northern Ireland and Ireland to measure educational attainment in both jurisdictions over time. The EU-LFS provides

educational attainment on a three-point scale of low, medium and high education.[8] Figure 2.1 displays the proportions of those aged 15-64 years in each jurisdiction who obtain a low education or a high education. The proportion who attain a medium level education is roughly consistent over time; in 2019, it was 39.6% in Northern Ireland and 38.2% in Ireland.

FIGURE 2.1 HIGH AND LOW EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT 2005–2019, 15-64 YEAR OLDS



Source: EU-LFS, 2005–2019.

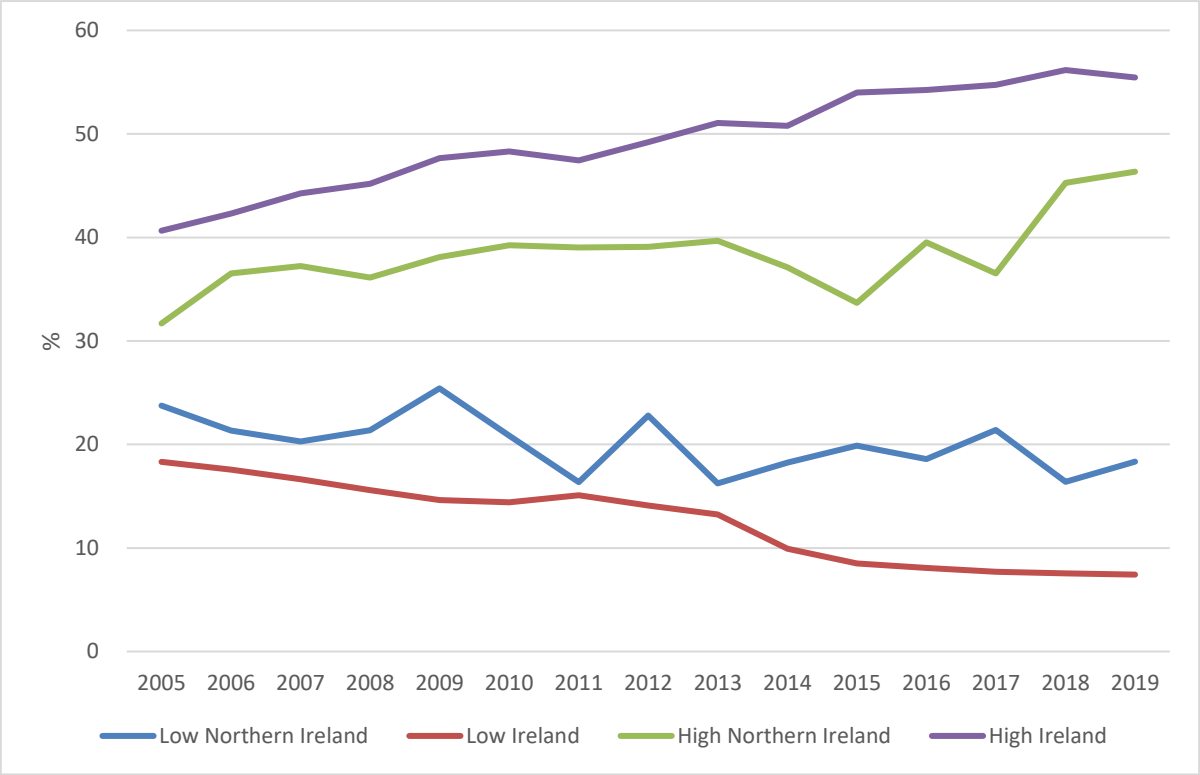
Between 2005 and 2019, across both jurisdictions, the proportion of those attaining a low level of education fell considerably while the proportion attaining a high level of education increased; from 23.3% in 2005 to 36.3% in 2019 in Northern Ireland and from 25.4% to 40.7% in Ireland. By 2019, the proportion of working-aged individuals in Northern Ireland with low educational attainment exceeded the level in Ireland by three percentage points; at the other end of the spectrum, the proportion of individuals with high educational attainment in Ireland in 2019 exceeded that of Northern Ireland by four percentage points.

Figure 2.2 shows the educational attainment (again high and low) in Northern Ireland for those aged 25-34 on the basis that educational patterns among this age group will more accurately reflect the current outputs of each respective education

[8] Low education is up to and including ISCED level 2, medium education is ISCED levels 3 and 4 and high education is ISCED levels 5 and more. This is consistent regardless of which ISCED classification is used, 97 or 11. For more information on the ISCED classification system, see https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=International_Standard_Classification_of_Education_%28ISCED%29#ISCE.

system. In 2019, 7.4% of those in this age bracket attained a low education in Ireland, compared to 18% in Northern Ireland. While both levels have fallen from 2005, the improvements in educational attainment have been greater in Ireland. However, while the proportion with a high level of education remains considerably higher in Ireland than in Northern Ireland, the more recent years have seen some convergence. Notwithstanding this, in 2019 the proportion of young people with high educational attainment in Ireland still exceeded that of Northern Ireland, by nine percentage points.

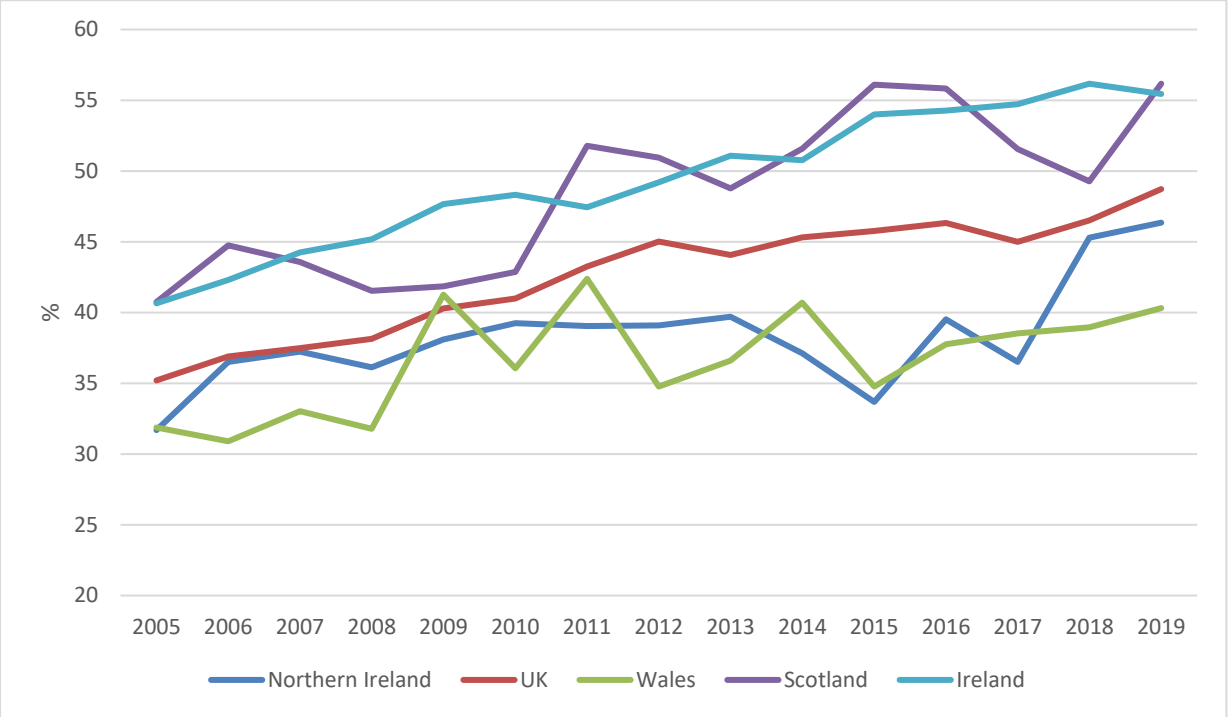
FIGURE 2.2 HIGH AND LOW EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT 2005–2019, 25-34 YEAR OLDS



Source: EU-LFS, 2005-2019.

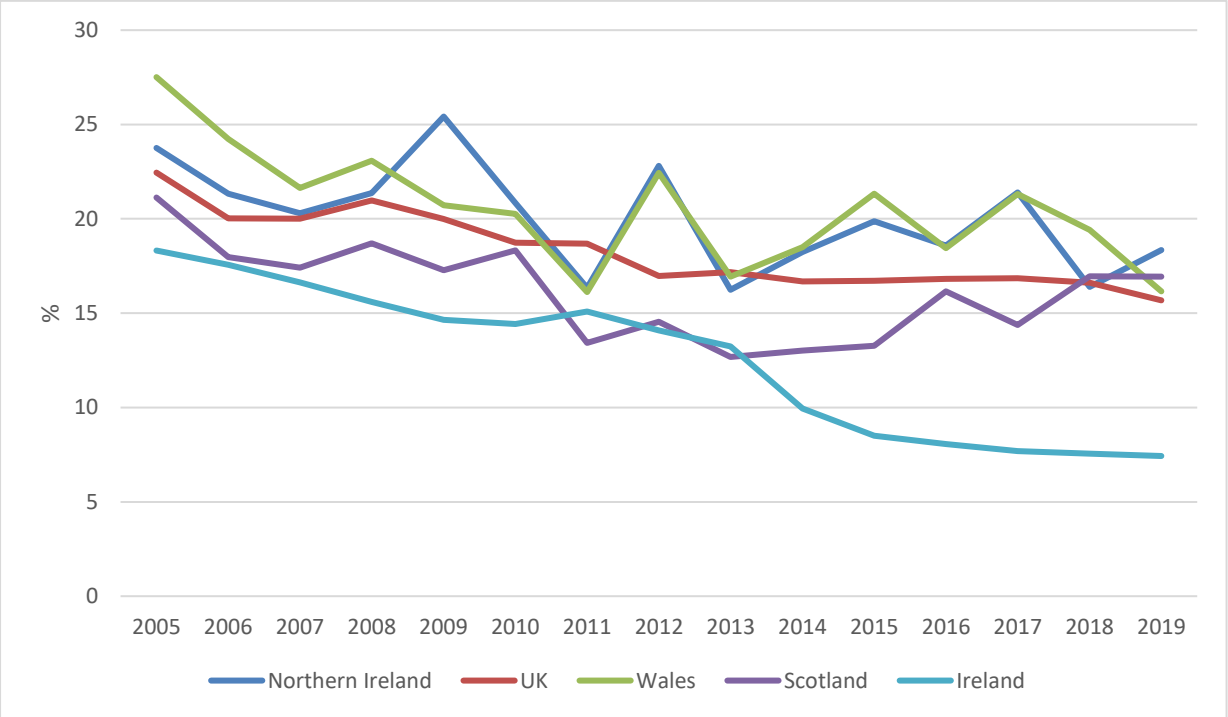
For context, Figures 2.3 and 2.4 compare educational attainment in the two jurisdictions of interest (Ireland and Northern Ireland) with that in the UK over the same period, showing that educational attainment in Northern Ireland is broadly in line with the UK average. We also look at educational attainment in the other devolved regions of the UK, that is Scotland and Wales, as these regions may be more comparable with Northern Ireland. The educational attainment in Northern Ireland is very similar to what is seen in Wales, while Scotland outperforms Northern Ireland, especially in terms of the proportion who attain a high level of education. Ireland performs well relative to all other regions but there has been significant divergence in the proportion with a low level of attainment over time; Ireland has seen the most improvement in this area in recent years which is reflective of the low proportion of early school leavers in Ireland.

FIGURE 2.3 HIGH EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT 2005–2019, 25-34 YEAR OLDS



Source: EU-LFS, 2005–2019.

FIGURE 2.4 LOW EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT 2005–2019, 25-34 YEAR OLDS



Source: EU-LFS, 2005-2019.

2.2.2 Patterns of educational attainment using PIAAC

In Table 2.1, we use PIAAC data to measure differences in educational attainment between the two jurisdictions. The levels of attainment will not directly align with those based on the EU-LFS data as (a) PIAAC is based on the International Standard Classification of Assessment (ISCED) 1997 classification system while the EU-LFS uses ISCED 2011 for 2014 and (b) there will be some variations due to sampling. Nevertheless, the patterns observed are very similar.[9] Again, we see that the proportions educated to the lowest levels of education are much higher in Northern Ireland, compared to Ireland. A substantially higher proportion of people in Northern Ireland are educated to upper secondary level relative to Ireland. The proportion of persons educated to lower secondary level, which roughly equates to Key Stage 3 in Northern Ireland and Junior Certificate in Ireland, was approximately seven percentage points higher in Ireland.[10,11] At the upper end of the spectrum, the data indicate that the proportions of the population holding third-level qualifications were broadly similar. However, the proportions in Ireland educated to post-secondary level was almost three times that of Northern Ireland. Consequently, the proportion of the population educated to the two highest levels of attainment (post-secondary and third level) was 49.1% in Ireland compared to 29.8% in Northern Ireland.

TABLE 2.1 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, 2014, ALL PERSONS (%)

	Northern Ireland	Ireland
Primary or below	19.1	8.1
Lower secondary	13.7	20.4
Upper secondary	37.4	22.4
Post-secondary	10.6	29.9
Degree or above	19.2	19.3
N	*3,721*	*5,965*

Source: PIAAC, own analyses.

Table 2.2 measures educational attainment among 25-29 year olds in 2014, as this will give a more accurate representation of how the respective education and training systems are performing currently. Compared to the results from Table 2.1, which will include older cohorts who completed education many decades ago, the data indicate that both jurisdictions have seen significant falls over time in the

9 Primary is no formal education as well as ISCED 1997 level 1, lower secondary is ISCED 1997 levels 2 and 3C (shorter than 2 years), upper secondary is ISCED 1997 3C (2 years or more) as well as 3A and 3B, post-secondary is ISCED 1997 level 4 and level 5B, tertiary education is a combination of levels 5A and 6. For the equivalence of the ISCED levels to actual qualifications in Northern Ireland and Ireland, see ISCED Mappings, UNESCO UIS.

10 Lower secondary level in Northern Ireland equates to Key Stage 3 as well as GCSEs if less than 5 A*-C grades.

11 ISCED 1997 level 2.

proportions of young people leaving education with the lowest levels of schooling. However, as indicated by the EU-LFS data, the falls have been greater in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. Among this age cohort, the incidence of low educational achievement in Northern Ireland, at 12.3%, is over five times that of Ireland. At the other end of the spectrum, while the proportions of young people obtaining third-level qualifications remain similar, it appears the gap in post-secondary achievement is also widening over time. The proportions of 25-29 year olds educated to the two highest levels of qualification was 65.9% in Ireland in 2014 compared to 40.8% in Northern Ireland. The data would suggest that there is either lower access to, or demand for, post-school sub-tertiary pathways in Northern Ireland compared to Ireland.

TABLE 2.2 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, 2014, 25-29 YEAR OLDS

	Northern Ireland	Ireland
Primary or below	12.4	2.2
Lower secondary	10.6	8.4
Upper secondary	36.2	23.5
Post-secondary	11.4	36.2
Degree or above	29.4	29.7
N	*352*	*579*

Source: PIAAC, own analyses.

Tables 2.3 and 2.4 detail educational attainment levels among young people by gender. Some marked differences occur relative to the pooled data; in particular, the proportion of females with third-level qualifications was four percentage points lower in Ireland in 2014 than in Northern Ireland. In contrast, there was a significant gap in favour of Ireland in the proportion of females educated to post-secondary level. For males, the stark difference in low educational attainment was again apparent between the two jurisdictions, with 13% in Northern Ireland having a primary or below education compared to 3% in Ireland. At the same time, males in Ireland were four percentage points more likely to have a third-level education compared to those in Northern Ireland and 18 percentage points more likely to have completed a post-secondary education.

Consistent with international patterns (see, for example, OECD, 2020b), males in both jurisdictions were more likely to be qualified to the lowest level of educational achievement compared to females; females in both Northern Ireland and Ireland were more likely to hold third-level qualifications compared to males.

TABLE 2.3 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT 2014, 25-29 YEAR OLDS, FEMALES

	Northern Ireland (%)	Ireland (%)
Primary or below	11.5	1.2
Lower secondary	9.1	7.9
Upper secondary	36.1	20.4
Post-secondary	8.1	38.9
Degree or above	35.1	31.6
N	*235*	*322*

Source: PIAAC, own analyses.

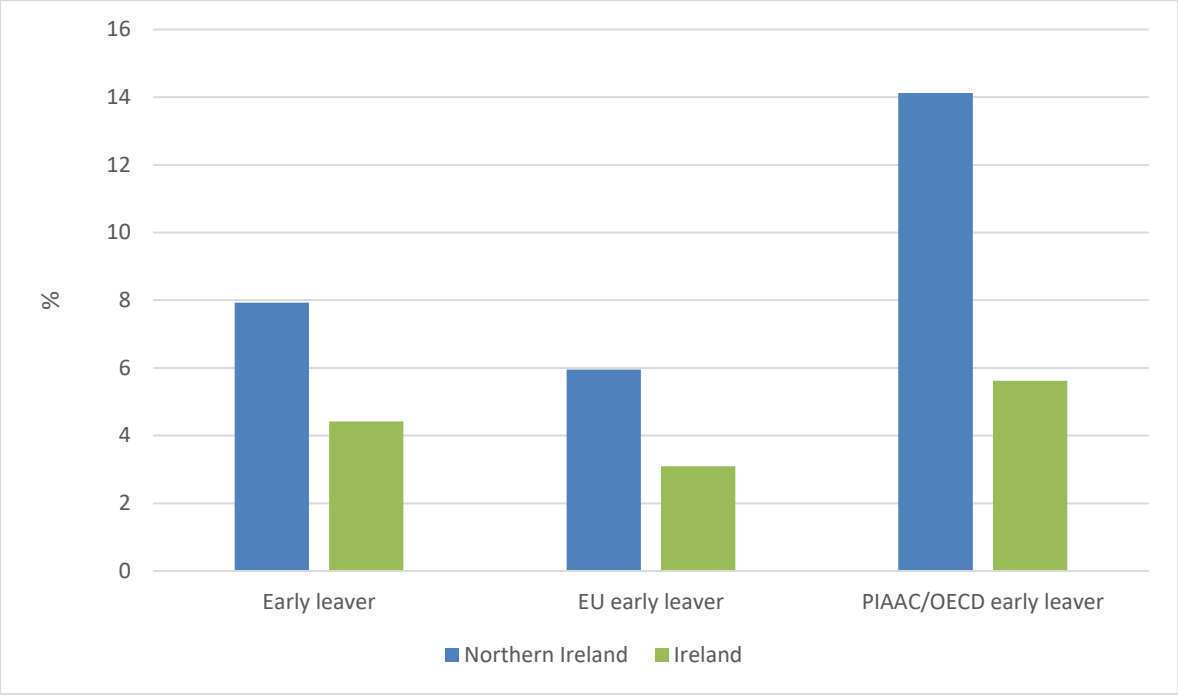
TABLE 2.4 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT 2014, 25-29 YEAR OLDS, MALES

	Northern Ireland (%)	Ireland (%)
Primary or below	13.2	3.2
Lower secondary	12.1	9.0
Upper secondary	36.3	26.8
Post-secondary	14.8	33.4
Degree or above	23.6	27.6
N	*117*	*257*

Source: PIAAC, own analyses.

Early school leaving is known to be a particularly damaging form of educational failure, severely hampering an individual's chances of obtaining quality employment and wage progression (Brunello and De Paola, 2014). From the data it is possible to derive three alternative measures of early school leaving: (1) the PIAAC/OECD definition of persons aged 16 to 24 not in education qualified to lower secondary level or below; (2) the EU definition of persons aged 16 to 24 not in employment, education or training (NEET) educated to lower secondary level or below; and (3) persons aged 20 to 24 who are NEET and educated to lower secondary level or below. Although the three measurement approaches differ somewhat, a consistent trend emerges, with the Northern Ireland early school leaving rate in 2014 much higher than that of Ireland (Figure 2.5). Based on the OECD definition used by PIAAC, 14.1% of 16-24 year olds in Northern Ireland were early school leavers in 2014, while the comparable figure for Ireland was 5.6%. The results for early school leaving based on PIAAC data are consistent with those reported by Bergin and McGuinness (2021).

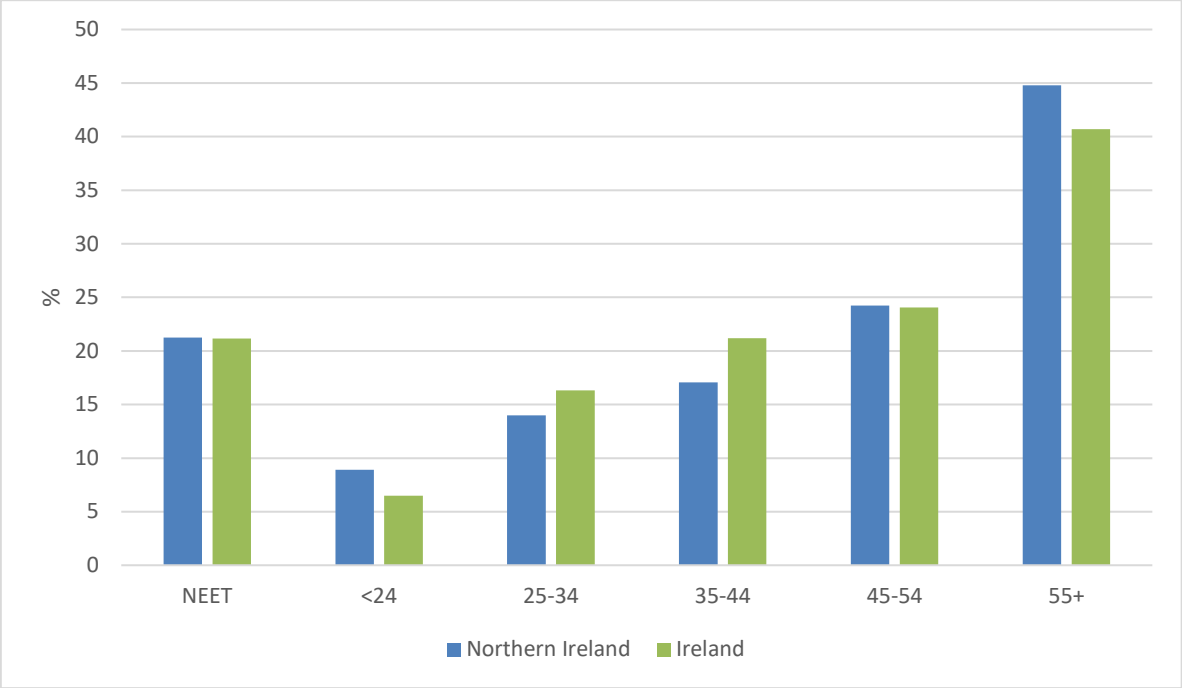
FIGURE 2.5 EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN 2014 (USING DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS)



Source: PIAAC, own analyses.
Note: The number of observations for early leavers, EU early leavers and PIAAC/OECD early leavers respectively are 723, 1,293, and 1,290.

Next, we examine comparative rates of educational and employment exclusion focusing specifically on those who are NEET. Figure 2.6 shows that while the overall rate of NEET is highly similar for both jurisdictions, at approximately 21%, some differences do occur when we measure the NEET incidence within particular age groups. The NEET rate was higher in Northern Ireland among those aged below 24 and over 65 years; in contrast, NEET rates were higher in Ireland among those aged 25 to 44.

FIGURE 2.6 NEET BY AGE GROUP IN 2014



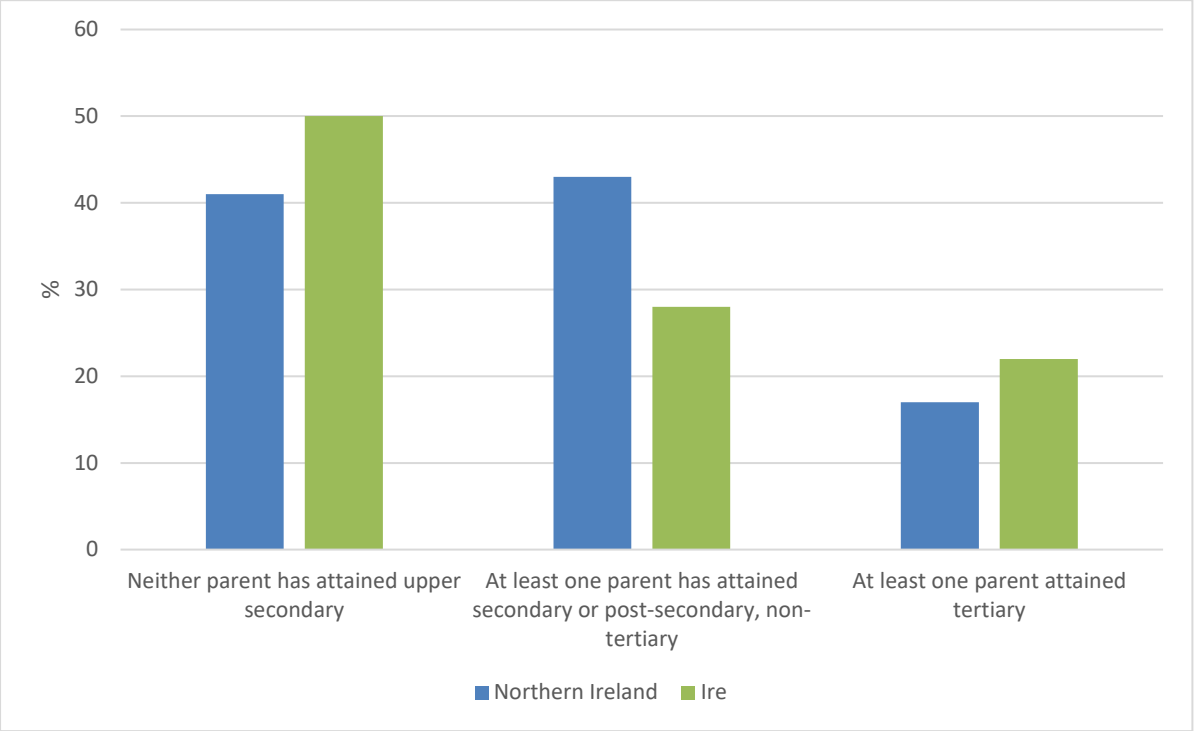
Source: PIAAC, own analyses.
Note: N = 3,761 for Northern Ireland and 5,983 for Ireland.

2.2.3 How social background relates to educational attainment, early school leaving and NEET

Social background is well documented as having a strong relationship with both education and economic outcomes for individuals (Hill, 2017; OECD, 2005). In particular, there is an extensive literature on the impact of parental educational attainment and/or occupation on child educational attainment (OECD, 2005; Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). However, the extent to which parents' educational attainment is a predictor of education varies between countries (OECD, 2005).

Figure 2.7 presents parental educational attainment for all age groups in the two jurisdictions using the PIAAC dataset. It shows that 50% of those in Ireland report that neither parent had attained an upper secondary education, compared to 41% in Northern Ireland. On the other hand, 22% of those in Ireland have at least one parent who attained a tertiary level education, compared to 17% in Northern Ireland.

FIGURE 2.7 PARENTAL EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT FOR ALL AGE GROUPS COMBINED, 2014



Source: PIAAC, own analyses.
Note: N=3,397 for Northern Ireland and 5,677 for Ireland.

We then look at how the educational attainment of parents measures against individual education level. In Northern Ireland, those individuals whose parents have the lowest levels of education are less likely to have higher levels of education than their counterparts in Ireland; 21% in Northern Ireland whose parents have no upper secondary education attain either a post-secondary or higher education, compared to 53% in Ireland (Table 2.5). These individuals whose parents have the lowest levels of attainment are much more likely to have a primary or below education; 27% of individuals in Northern Ireland whose parents have no upper secondary qualifications have at most a primary education, while for those who have one parent with at least a secondary education this figure falls drastically to 4%.

TABLE 2.5 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND PARENTAL EDUCATION BY JURISDICTION

	Primary or below	Lower secondary	Upper secondary	Post-secondary	Degree or above	*N*
Northern Ireland						
No upper secondary	27.1	15.4	36.3	9.5	11.8	*1,411*
At least 1 has attained secondary or post-secondary, non-tertiary	4.4	9.6	42.6	12.9	30.6	*1,414*
At least 1 attained tertiary	0.0	1.5	21.8	17.7	59.0	*572*
Ireland						
No upper secondary	4.7	18.8	23.6	35.2	17.8	*2,826*
At least 1 has attained secondary or post-secondary, non-tertiary	0.9	6.7	21.6	40.9	29.9	*1,601*
At least 1 attained tertiary	0.6	4.0	13.2	32.2	50.0	*1,250*

Source: PIAAC, own analyses, all age groups.

These differences between the two jurisdictions are stark and suggest that social background is a greater predictor of educational attainment in Northern Ireland than in Ireland. We use a probit model to formally estimate this relationship between social background and low educational attainment. In our social background model, Table 2.6, the dependent variable is binary, indicating whether an individual has low educational attainment across a range of measures. In columns 1 and 2, the dependent variable in the model captures NEET status, in columns 3 to 5 the model captures early school leaving using the three different measures previously mentioned and columns 6 and 7 report results from models where the dependent variable captures whether the highest level of education achieved is primary or below. In columns 2 and 7, the sample is restricted to those who are 25-34 years of age.

Our models also include a control for gender that takes the value one if the individual is male and zero for females. Parental educational attainment is also a binary variable, whereby those individuals who had neither parent with an upper secondary education are coded as one and zero otherwise. Table 2.5 shows the results of these models, which were run separately for Northern Ireland and Ireland; marginal effects are displayed.[12] In Northern Ireland, individuals are 19 percentage points more likely to be NEET if their parents have low educational attainment compared to 18 percentage points in Ireland. However, when we look at this among those aged 25-34 years, the results differ to a much greater extent. Among this age group in Northern Ireland, individuals whose parents have low educational attainment are 20 percentage points more likely to be NEET compared to ten percentage points in Ireland. In terms of early school leaving, the same pattern emerges. Individuals in Northern Ireland whose parents have low educational attainment are 27 percentage points more likely to be early school leavers (PIAAC using the OECD definition of early school leaving) compared to those in Ireland who are 13 percentage points more likely to be early school leavers. Thus, using this definition of early school leaving, the estimated impact of social background is twice as large in Northern Ireland than it is in Ireland. Primary-level education is also twice as likely to be affected by parents' education in Northern Ireland than is the case in Ireland (22 percentage points versus 11 percentage points). When we restrict the sample to those aged 25-34, again the difference is much greater; those in Northern Ireland whose parents have low educational attainment are 13 percentage points more likely to attain a primary education compared to four percentage points in Ireland.

We can see from Table 2.6 that gender is not associated with educational attainment when parental education is controlled for, at least to the level that may be anticipated. This is particularly the case in Northern Ireland, which is of interest given the ongoing policy debate there on the educational attainment of working-class Protestant boys.[13] It should be noted that religious affiliation is not collected in this survey so social background and community membership cannot be disentangled here. The Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement concluded that while gender and religious differences do occur, social background (based on free school meal entitlement) was where the greatest attainment differences were evident.[14] That the social background effect remains so apparent among those aged 25-34 years in Northern Ireland is particularly concerning.

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12 Marginal effects can be interpreted as the percentage point difference in reporting as the outcome variable, e.g. NEET, early school leaving or having a primary education.

13 While gender does not significantly impact outcomes when social background is controlled for, it is an important predictor of performance within education levels.

14 It is often cited that working-class boys, in particular working-class Protestant boys, underperform in school. This was a key finding of the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland published in 2021 (Purdy et al., 2021).

TABLE 2.6 PROBIT REGRESSION MODEL OF GENDER AND PARENTAL EDUCATION ON EDUCATION OUTCOMES

	NEET	NEET (25-34 years)	Early school leaving	Early school leaving EU	Early school leaving PIAAC	Primary	Primary (25-34 years)
Northern Ireland							
Male	-0.048***	-0.122***	-0.036	-0.032	-0.011	0.016	-0.010
Parents have low educational attainment	0.192***	0.199***	0.195***	0.153***	0.266***	0.224***	0.134***
N	*3,385*	*694*	*270*	*471*	*471*	*3,393*	*694*
Ireland							
Male	-0.068***	-0.072***	0.006	-0.012	0.028*	0.022***	0.005
Parents have low educational attainment	0.176***	0.099***	0.112***	0.092***	0.130***	0.112***	0.038***
N	*5,675*	*1,328*	*397*	*720*	*720*	*5,677*	*1,329*

Source: PIAAC, own analyses.
Notes: Marginal effects are displayed. ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1.

2.3 PERFORMANCE AT LOWER AND UPPER SECONDARY LEVELS

This section looks at the extent to which exam performance at lower and upper secondary levels varies by gender and social background across the two jurisdictions. Given differences in the curriculum and assessment systems, outcomes cannot be directly compared. Instead, the analyses focus on the proportion of students achieving benchmarks that are commonly used in each system. At lower secondary level, the standards used are five or more GCSEs at grades A*–C grade (Northern Ireland) and six or more D3 or merit grades, of which two are A–C at higher or common levels (Ireland). At upper secondary level, the standards are three or more A-levels at A*–C grades (Northern Ireland) and six or more grades at H1–H6 or O1–O6, of which two or more are at H1–H4 (Ireland). The data used relate to 2019 as the assessment approach in both settings differed in 2020 and 2021 because of the pandemic. The exam data do not contain detailed information on social background. However, in Northern Ireland receipt of free school meals (FSM) is a long-established, if not always uncontroversial, proxy for socio-economic disadvantage (Taylor, 2017). Similarly, in Ireland being eligible for an exam-fee waiver can be taken as a proxy for disadvantage. Furthermore, the concentration of disadvantage at the school level can be measured using the same proxy.

TABLE 2.7 PROPORTION WHO REACHED SPECIFIC GRADE STANDARDS AT LOWER AND UPPER SECONDARY LEVELS BY GENDER AND FSM STATUS, NORTHERN IRELAND, 2019

	Males		Females	
	FSM students	Non-FSM students	FSM students	Non-FSM students
% 5+ GCSEs A*- C	74.2	87.8	82.1	93.6
% 3+ A-levels A*- C	57.9	71.8	63.1	75.9
N (Year 12)	*2,703*	*7,304*	*2,935*	*10,085*
N (Year 14)	*803*	*4,379*	*1,348*	*5,545*

Source: Department of Education (2019). Year 12 and Year 14 examination at post-primary schools in Northern Ireland 2018/2019 tables.

Table 2.7 shows that exam performance in Northern Ireland varies by both gender and FSM status. Females achieve higher grades than males at both GCSE and A-level. Disadvantaged students achieve lower grades than non-disadvantaged students at both levels, with male disadvantaged students achieving the lowest exam results overall. Other published exam data (Department of Education, 2019, Tables 10 and 11) allow us to examine whether the concentration of disadvantage at school level (that is, the proportion of students in the school with FSM status) makes a difference to exam performance. Unfortunately, the figures are presented separately for grammar and non-grammar schools. This makes it difficult to look at the overall relationship between school-level disadvantage and academic outcomes because grammar schools typically have much smaller numbers of students with FSM status. Overall, students attending grammar schools with the most advantaged profiles receive higher grades at GCSE and A-level. Performance among students in non-grammar schools does not vary as markedly by the concentration of disadvantage at school level.[15]

[15] Published exam data also indicate variation in exam performance among non-grammar schools in terms of their governance structures, so this may complicate the pattern of variation by disadvantage.

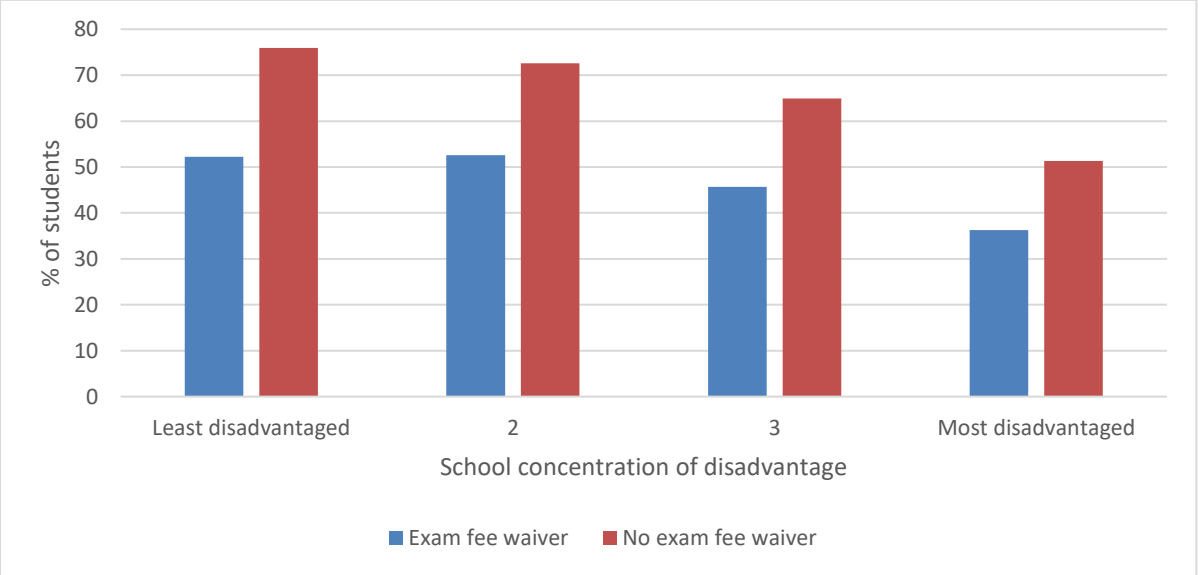
TABLE 2.8 PROPORTION WHO REACHED SPECIFIC GRADE STANDARDS AT LOWER AND UPPER SECONDARY LEVELS BY GENDER AND EXAM-FEE STATUS, IRELAND, 2019

	Males		Females	
	Exam-fee waiver students	Non-exam-fee waiver students	Exam-fee waiver students	Non-exam-fee waiver students
% JC 6+ 'passes' and 2 'honours'	52.5	77.0	67.1	87.7
% LC 6+ 'passes' and 2 'honours'	38.5	62.7	49.0	73.5
N (JC)	*11,025*	*21,333*	*10,664*	*20,729*
N (LC)	*8,529*	*18,929*	*9,231*	*18,959*

Source: State Examinations Commission micro-data, own analyses.
Note: JC = Junior Certificate; LC = Leaving Certificate.

Analyses for Ireland also show variation by gender and socio-economic disadvantage (Table 2.8). Females achieve higher grades at both lower and upper secondary levels, and these gender gaps are relatively larger than in Northern Ireland. Disadvantaged students achieve lower grades than non-disadvantaged students at both levels and the relative gaps are larger than in Northern Ireland.

FIGURE 2.8 PROPORTION OF STUDENTS ACHIEVING SIX OR MORE LEAVING CERTIFICATE GRADE 6, OF WHICH TWO OR MORE ARE GRADE 4, IRELAND, 2019



Source: State Examinations Commission micro-data, own analyses.
Note: Leaving Certificate grades run from 1-8, within levels, with H1 being the highest grade which can be achieved.

Analyses of exam micro-data allow us to disentangle the impact of disadvantage at individual and school levels. At the individual level, disadvantage is measured by whether the student has an exam-fee waiver or not. Schools are then divided into quartiles on the basis of the proportion of their students who have an exam-fee waiver. More disadvantaged students achieve lower grades than non-

disadvantaged students, regardless of the school context (Figure 2.8). Furthermore, students in schools with a greater concentration of disadvantage achieve lower grades than those in schools with more advantaged profiles.

TABLE 2.9 CORRELATIONS AT SCHOOL LEVEL BETWEEN % OF DISADVANTAGE AND % REACHING LOWER AND UPPER SECONDARY EXAM GRADE STANDARDS, IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND, 2019

	Disadvantaged students in the school (%)	Students who reach lower secondary grade standards (%)
Northern Ireland		
% Disadvantaged (FSM status)		
% reaching lower secondary grade standards	-0.780***	
% reaching upper secondary grade standards	-0.539***	0.660***
Ireland		
% Disadvantaged (exam-fee waiver status)		
% reaching lower secondary grade standards	-0.688***	
% reaching upper secondary grade standards	-0.709***	0.802***

Source: State Examinations Commission micro-data, own analyses; Department of Education school-level data and results of school league tables published in the Belfast Telegraph.[16]

The figures presented above indicate that academic performance varies by the social composition of schools in both jurisdictions. As context, it is worth examining the extent of social segregation between schools in both systems; such segregation can result from neighbourhood segregation, school choice and (in Northern Ireland) the selection system. An index of dissimilarity provides a useful summary measure to compare segregation in the two settings; it measures the extent to which a certain proportion of the population would have to move schools so that there would be an equal distribution of groups of students across schools (Duncan and Duncan, 1955). For these purposes, free school meal receipt and exam-fee waiver status are used as proxies for disadvantage in Northern Ireland and Ireland respectively. To calculate these measures, we use State Examinations Commission microdata on lower secondary students in Ireland and published figures for the number of students with and without FSM status in individual Northern Ireland schools.[17] The analyses indicate that social segregation is greater in schools in

16 See https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/league-tables/.

17 Unfortunately, school-level data in Northern Ireland relate to the total number of students with and without FSM status and so the extent to which between-school segregation is greater at lower or upper secondary level cannot be examined.

Northern Ireland, with an index of dissimilarity of 24.4 compared with 18.4 in Ireland. In other words, almost one-quarter of students in Northern Ireland would have to move school to achieve an equal distribution of disadvantaged students across schools. It should be noted that this measure does not take account of more nuanced measures of social background (such as parental education or social background) or religion/community.

Analyses were conducted at the school level to examine the extent to which average exam performance reflected the concentration of disadvantage (Table 2.9). In both systems, exam performance decreases with increasing levels of disadvantage. At lower secondary level, this relationship was somewhat stronger in Northern Ireland, suggesting that the above analyses, which distinguished between grammar and non-grammar schools, somewhat obscured the extent of educational disadvantage. At upper secondary level, the relationship between disadvantage and average grades is less marked in Northern Ireland than in Ireland. This appears to reflect the impact of patterns of early school leaving, which are higher in Northern Ireland (see Section 2.2), making those who remain for A-levels a more selective group in terms of social background and prior achievement. Using the difference in student numbers in Year 8 and Year 14 as a proxy for drop-out, a correlation of 0.48 is found between early school leaving and school-level disadvantage in Northern Ireland. In other words, the level of early school leaving is much greater in schools serving more socio-economically disadvantaged populations.

2.4 SKILL DEVELOPMENT OVER THE LIFECOURSE

This section looks at skill development from entry-level to primary education and through to adulthood, drawing on international comparative studies in which both Ireland and Northern Ireland participated, as well as on survey data collected on five year olds. The analyses focus on differences by gender and parental education (and, in the case of adults, their own level of educational attainment). The analysis of other axes of differentiation, such as migrant status, is beyond the scope of the current study. However, it is worth noting that the Irish school-going population is more diverse than that of Northern Ireland; analyses of PISA data indicate that 18% of the 15 year olds surveyed in Ireland were first- or second-generation migrants, compared with just 9% in Northern Ireland (PISA, own analyses).[18]

2.4.1 Skills at the time of primary school entry

Insights into skill development around the time of primary school entry can be gleaned from the *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) study and from the Northern Ireland

[18] Migrant integration will be addressed in a forthcoming study under the Shared Island Unit research programme.

sample of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS).[19] Both studies followed children and their families from nine months to five years of age, collecting detailed information on family background characteristics, such as parental education and household income. Both studies involved the administration of the British Ability Scale vocabulary measure at age five. In addition, the teachers of the participating children were asked to report on competencies in relation to five domains: (1) attitudes to, and engagement with, school (including concentration); (2) language for communication and understanding (such as talking and listening confidently); (3) linking sounds and letters (including hearing and saying vowel sounds); (4) reading (including understanding story); and (5) numbers (including counting). The measures were identical in both countries, with the scales scored from zero to nine. However, the data were gathered at different time points; the survey for Ireland was conducted in 2015–2016, while the Northern Ireland one was carried out in 2006–2007.

TABLE 2.10 VOCABULARY TEST SCORE AND TEACHER-RATED CHILD COMPETENCIES AMONG FIVE-YEAR-OLDS IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND

	Ireland		Northern Ireland	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Vocabulary	54.45***	55.45	56.07	56.23
Attitudes	7.56***	8.00	7.43***	7.98
Language	7.38***	7.83	6.76***	7.58
Linking sounds and letters	7.53***	7.94	6.18**	6.69
Reading	7.36***	7.75	7.24**	7.57
Numbers	7.63***	7.77	7.66**	7.91
N	*4,169*	*4,116*	*498*	*520*

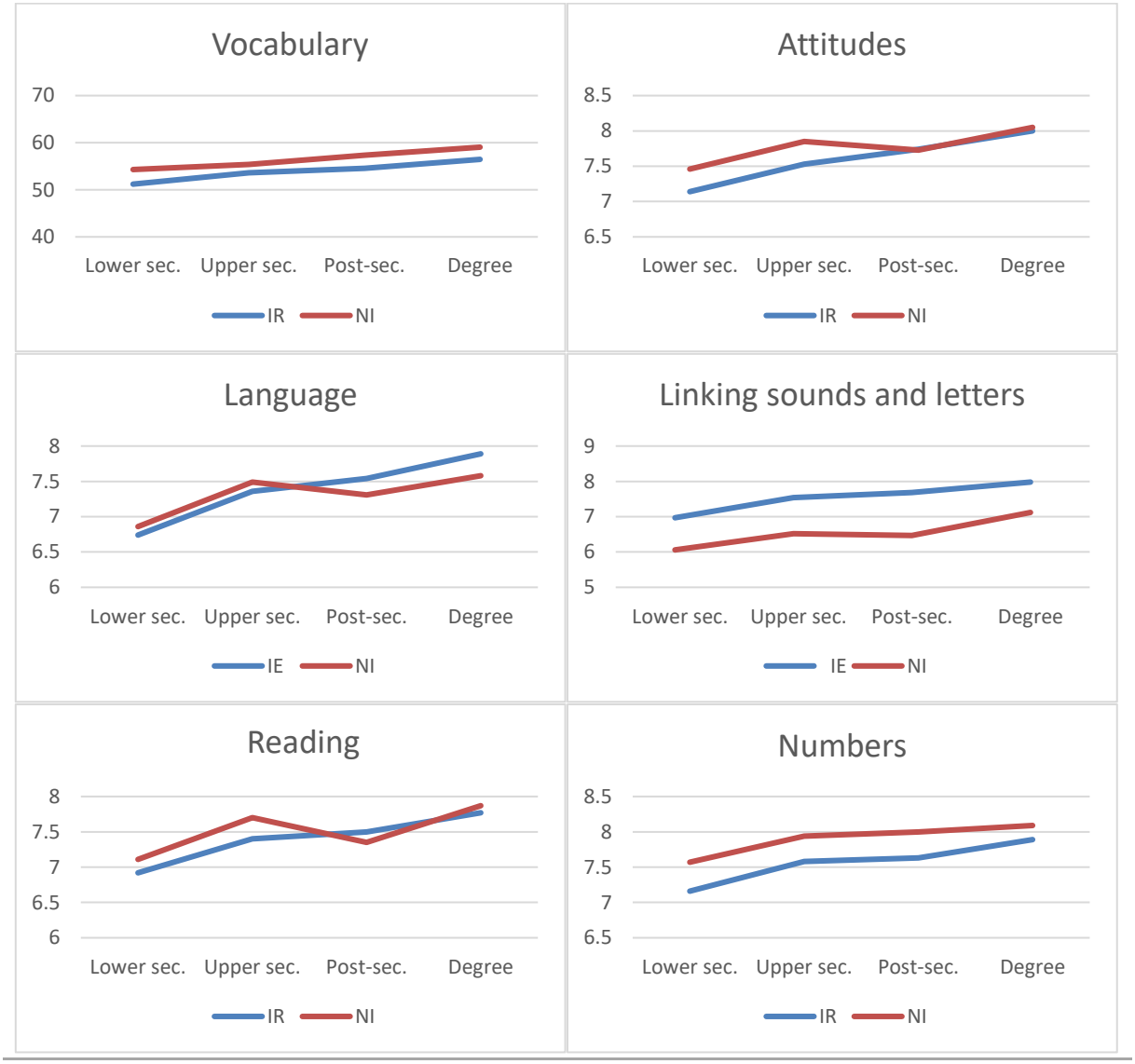
Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* Cohort '08, Waves 1–3; Millennium Cohort Study, Waves 1–3.
Note: *** p<.001, ** p<.01 for within-country gender differences.

Table 2.10 shows the average test scores and teacher ratings among five year olds, by gender. Overall, vocabulary test scores are slightly (but not markedly) higher in Northern Ireland,[20] but the teacher ratings of child competencies tend to be somewhat higher in Ireland (with the exception of number skills). In Ireland, girls have significantly higher vocabulary scores and more positive teacher ratings than boys, while in Northern Ireland, though girls are more positively rated by teachers, the objective vocabulary levels do not differ significantly by gender. These between-system differences may relate to differences in the home learning

19 The Millennium Cohort study covered Northern Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland.
20 Previous research also using the MCS data (Taylor et al., 2013) indicates that, controlling for a range of family background factors, vocabulary scores at age five are significantly higher in Northern Ireland than in England, Scotland or Wales.

environment (e.g. the frequency with which parents read to children) and/or differences in curricular approaches (e.g. the timing of formal reading instruction), either within schools or in early years provision. Average differences may also reflect differences in the composition of the two populations in terms of factors such as education, social background, income and migrant status.

FIGURE 2.9 VOCABULARY TEST SCORE AND TEACHER-RATED CHILD COMPETENCIES AMONG FIVE YEAR OLDS IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND, BY MATERNAL EDUCATION



Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* Cohort '08, Waves 1–3; Millennium Cohort Study, Waves 1–3.

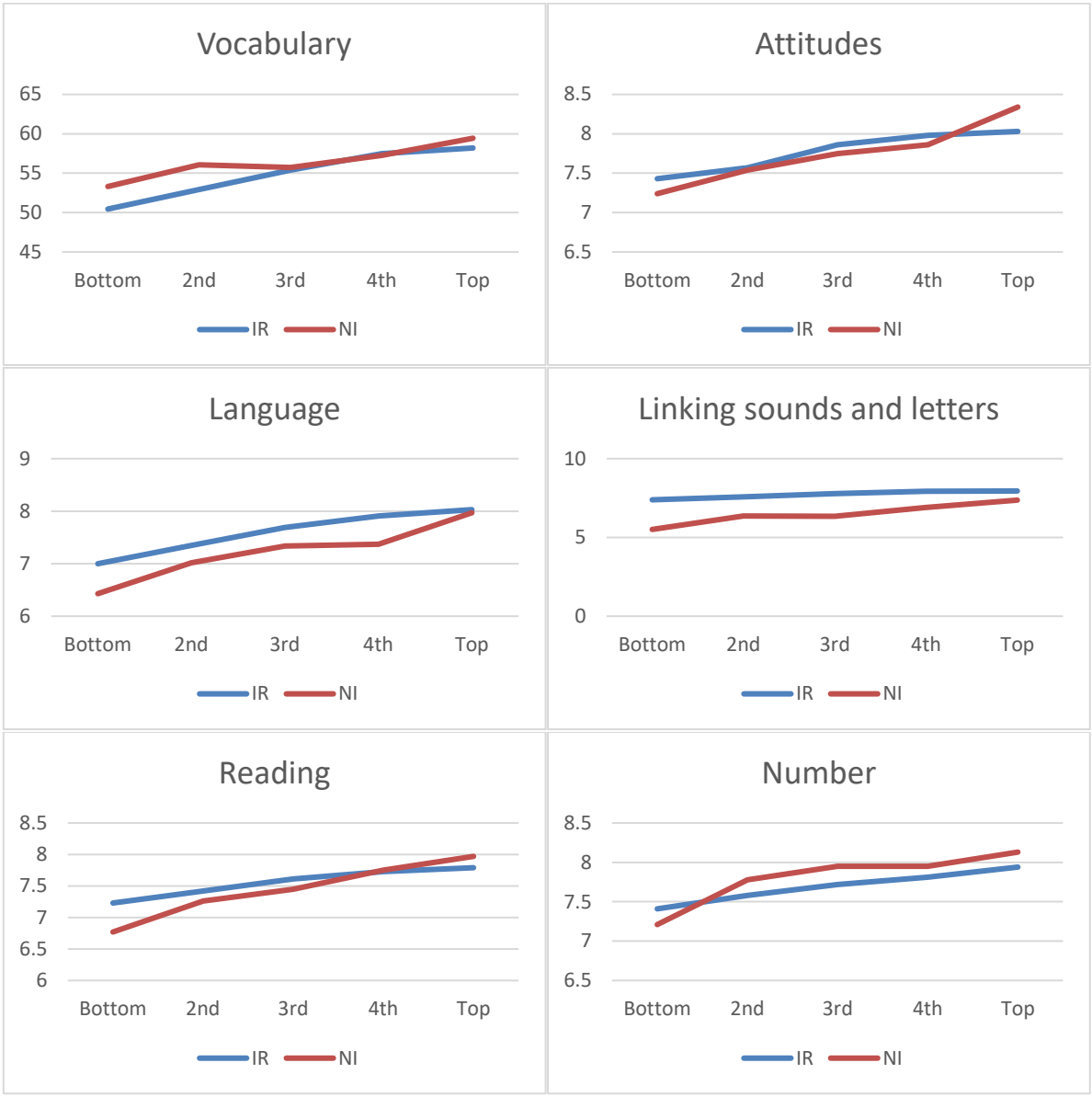
The extent to which a child has already developed skills when they start their formal education has implications for their longer-term outcomes (Chowdry and McBride, 2017). For this reason, it is worth looking at potential inequalities in skill

development by family background, using measures of maternal education and household income quintile collected when the child was nine months old.[21]

The highest skill levels are found among those whose mothers have a degree (or higher qualification) and the lowest levels found among those whose mothers have lower secondary education or less (Figure 2.9). This pattern is found across both jurisdictions. However, the gap between the highest and lowest groups is slightly greater in Ireland than in Northern Ireland (with the exception of linking sounds and letters, where the reverse is true).

21 Household income was equivalised to take account of household size and composition.

FIGURE 2.10 VOCABULARY TEST SCORE AND TEACHER-RATED CHILD COMPETENCIES AMONG FIVE YEAR OLDS IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME QUINTILES



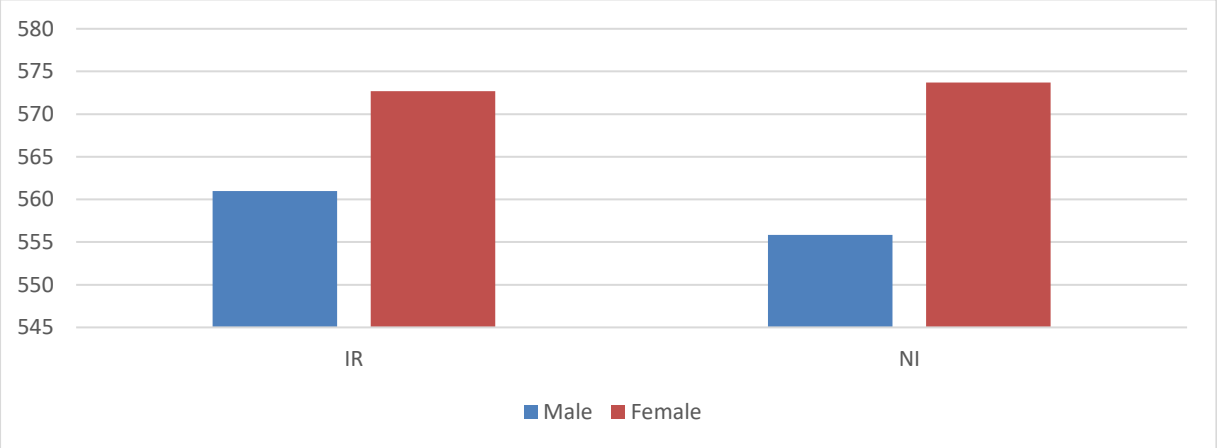
Source: *Growing Up in Ireland* Cohort '08, Waves 1–3; Millennium Cohort Study, Waves 1–3.
Note: All differences are significant at the p<.001 level.

The picture is somewhat different when patterns are examined by household income (Figure 2.10). In both countries, skill levels are higher among children from higher income households. In relation to vocabulary, the gap between the top and lowest income groups is somewhat greater in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. However, for the teacher-rated skills, inequality tends to be greater in Northern Ireland. This seems to be driven by better ratings in Ireland among those in the very lowest income group. While not definitive, this pattern is likely to reflect the strong emphasis on promoting literacy and numeracy skills in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) schools, those serving the most disadvantaged populations.

2.4.2 Skills in middle childhood

Two sets of studies can be used to look at skill development at fourth grade of primary education (around nine to ten years of age): the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) conducted in 2016, which assessed reading comprehension, and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) conducted in 2019, which assessed maths and science literacy (see Table 1.1). It is worth noting that the use of plausible values in the test scores for PIRLS, TIMSS and PISA (see Section 2.4.3) requires the use of the bespoke IEA International Database Analyzer (IDBAnalyzer) to analyse the data. This package produces 'side-by-side' analyses of the two countries rather than integrating the two datasets to directly test the significance of any differences. The tests of significance presented are therefore based on whether or not the confidence intervals overlap for the specific groups examined.

FIGURE 2.11 AVERAGE READING LITERACY SCORE AMONG 9-10 YEAR OLDS BY GENDER IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND



Source: PIRLS 2016 data, own analyses.
Notes: The sample sizes were 2,353 male and 2,240 female in Ireland and 1,846 male and 1,833 female in Northern Ireland.

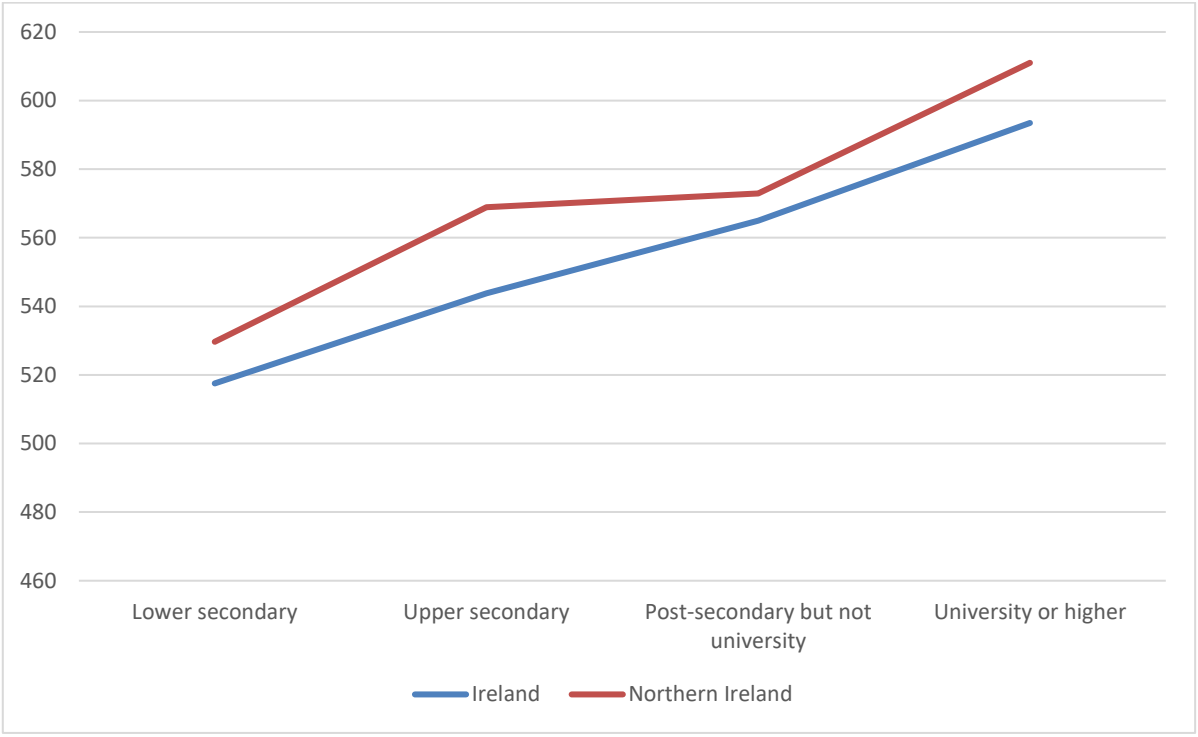
Both Ireland and Northern Ireland emerge as high-performing countries in reading literacy (Sizmur et al., 2017), with no significant differences in average scores between the two jurisdictions. The spread of scores, that is, the difference between the highest and lowest attainers, is wider in Northern Ireland than in Ireland and other comparator countries, except New Zealand (Sizmur et al., 2017).[22] It is not possible to determine the reasons for this pattern but it may be, at least in part, related to the much greater use of ability grouping for reading in Northern Ireland than in comparator countries. Furthermore, the proportion of students who 'very much like reading' is lower in Northern Ireland than in Ireland

[22] The gap in scores between the fifth and 95th percentile scores was 267 points, compared with 243 in Ireland and 259 in England (Sizmur et al., 2017).

(39% compared with 46%) and the international average (43%) (Sizmur et al., 2017).

In both systems, girls score significantly better in reading literacy (Figure 2.11). Students from more highly educated families have higher reading literacy scores than those with lower levels of education (Figure 2.12), with a similar relative gap between the top and the bottom groups in both settings. Reading literacy appears slightly higher in Northern Ireland than Ireland for those whose mothers have upper secondary or tertiary qualifications.

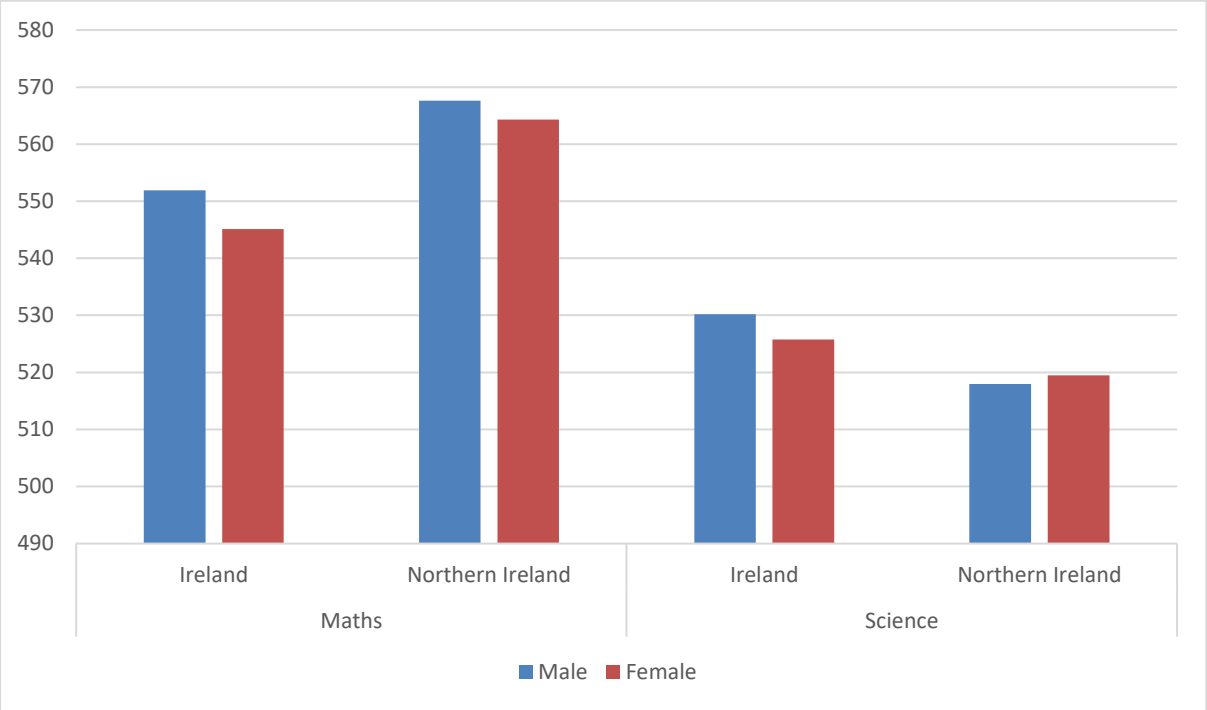
FIGURE 2.12 AVERAGE READING LITERACY SCORE AMONG 9-10 YEAR OLDS BY MATERNAL EDUCATION IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND



Source: PIRLS 2016 data, own analyses.

Children in both jurisdictions do relatively well in maths and science literacy. Average maths scores are significantly higher in Northern Ireland, while average science scores are significantly higher in Ireland (Mullis et al., 2020). As with reading, the spread of scores in maths between higher and lower attainers is wider in Northern Ireland than in comparator countries, though this is not the case for science (Burge et al., 2020). There is no significant gender difference in maths or science literacy in either country (Figure 2.13). The proportion with very positive attitudes to maths is lower in Ireland and Northern Ireland than in many other countries, while attitudes to science are slightly more positive than the international average (Burge et al., 2020).

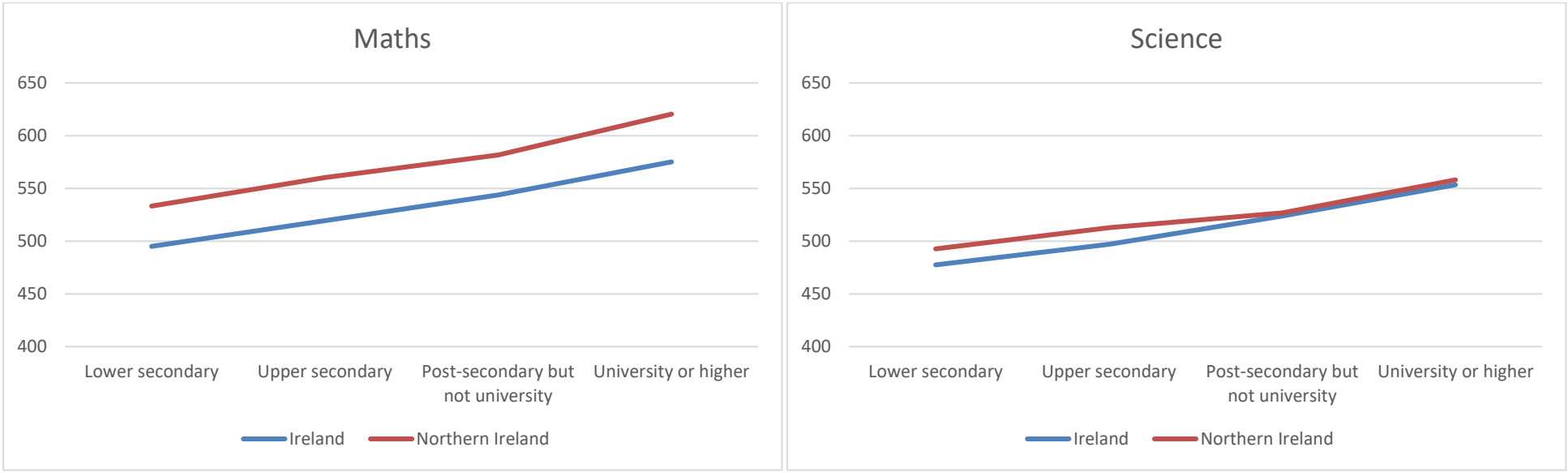
FIGURE 2.13 AVERAGE MATHS AND SCIENCE SCORES AMONG 9-10 YEAR OLDS BY GENDER IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND



Source: TIMSS 2019 data, own analyses.
Notes: The samples sizes are 2,254 for males and 2,311 for females in Ireland and 1,756 males and 1,733 females in Northern Ireland.

In both Ireland and Northern Ireland, children from more highly educated families do significantly better in both maths and science, with a similar gap between the top and bottom groups in the two settings (Figure 2.14). Maths scores are higher in Northern Ireland for all education groups, with no significant between-jurisdiction differences in science for any of the education groups.

FIGURE 2.14 AVERAGE MATHS AND SCIENCE SCORES AMONG 9-10 YEAR OLDS BY MATERNAL EDUCATION IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND

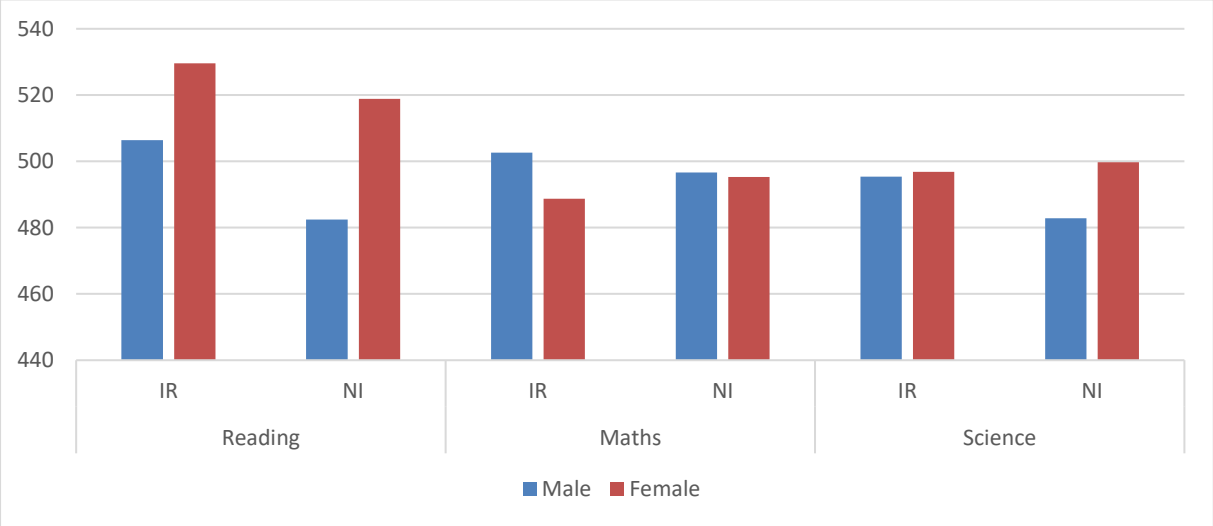


Source: TIMSS 2019 data, own analyses.

2.4.3 Skills in adolescence

The PISA 2018 study provides information on the reading, maths, and science literacy levels of 15 year olds (see Table 1.1). For this wave, reading was the major domain assessed, with maths and science assessed as minor domains. Both countries were high performing in reading in comparative terms, with higher average scores in Ireland than Northern Ireland, but around the OECD average and not significantly different from each other in maths and science (Sizmur et al., 2019). Within the UK, reading scores were above average for all jurisdictions but students in England outperformed those in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland in maths and science (Sizmur et al., 2019). The selective nature of secondary education in Northern Ireland means that reading literacy varies much more between schools than it does in Ireland (34% compared with 11% of the total of the variance in reading is due to the school level) (OECD, 2020b).

FIGURE 2.15 AVERAGE READING, MATHS AND SCIENCE SCORES AMONG 15 YEAR OLDS BY GENDER IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND



Source: PISA 2018 data, own analyses.
Note: The samples sizes are 2,800 for males and 2,777 for females in Ireland and 1,194 for males and 1,219 for females in Northern Ireland.

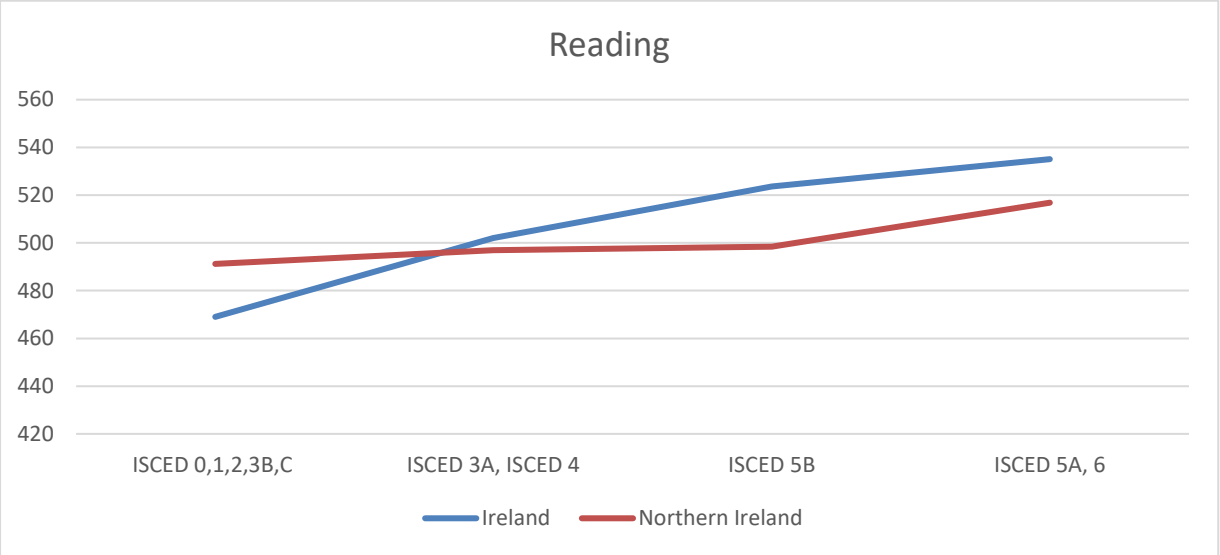
In both systems, female students achieved significantly higher reading literacy scores than males but no significant gender differences were evident for maths or science (Figure 2.15). Maths and science scores did not differ between the two systems. The overall gap in reading literacy was driven by the differences in male scores.

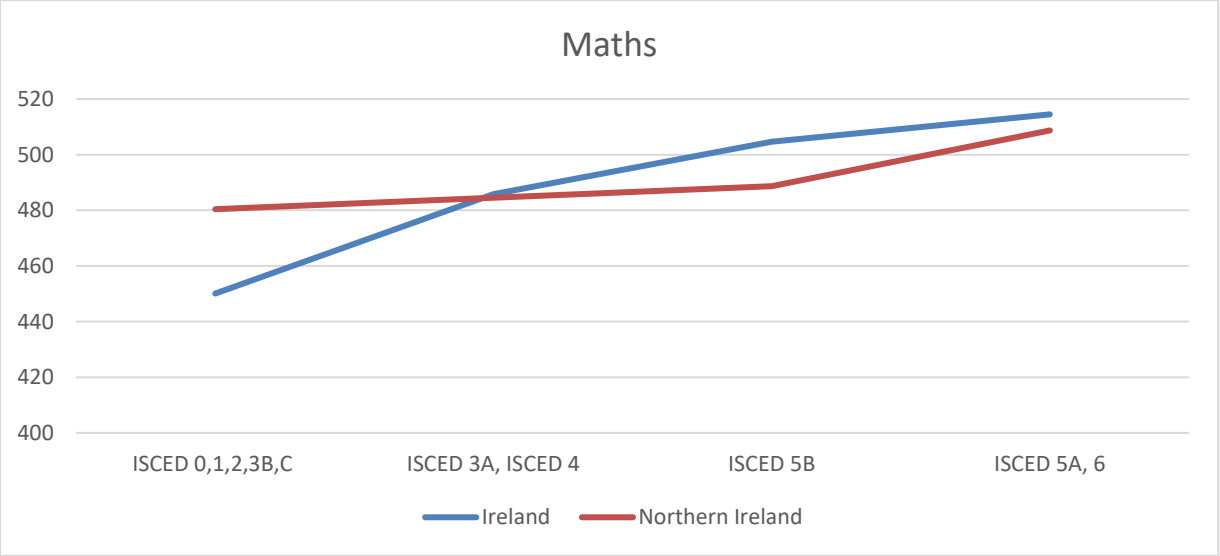
In both systems, the children of mothers with degree or postgraduate qualifications achieve significantly higher scores in all three domains than those in the lowest education group (vocational upper secondary or less).[23] The

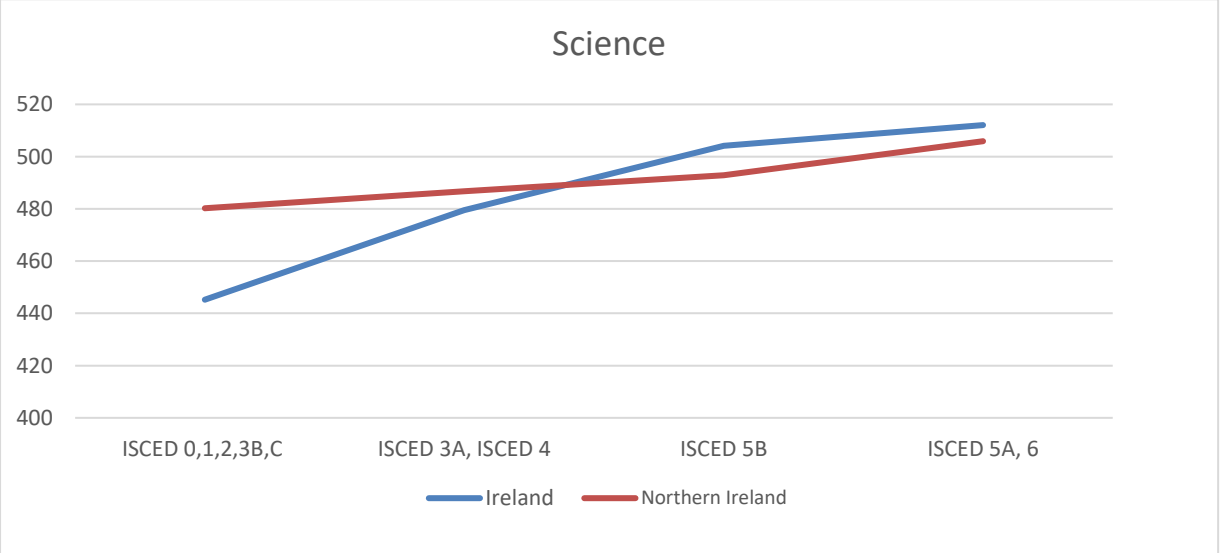
[23] It should be noted that PISA uses a pre-grouped classification of educational levels; levels 3B and C are combined with 0, 1 and 2 here because of small cell sizes.

differentiation by maternal education is more marked in Ireland than in Northern Ireland (Figure 2.16). For reading, scores are higher in Northern Ireland than Ireland for the lowest education group but significantly lower for the sub-degree and degree-level groups. Scores in maths and science are also significantly higher in Northern Ireland than Ireland for the lowest education group, with no significant differences for the other groups.

FIGURE 2.16 AVERAGE READING, MATHS AND SCIENCE SCORES AMONG 15 YEAR OLDS BY MATERNAL EDUCATION IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND







Source: PISA 2018 data, own analyses.

The PISA study can provide useful insights into specific school experiences that may be linked to subsequent early school leaving. Attitudes to reading were found to be more negative in Northern Ireland, with 43% strongly disagreeing that 'reading is one of my favourite hobbies' compared to 29% in Ireland; the figures for not reading for enjoyment were 61% in Northern Ireland and 47% in Ireland. However, truancy levels were somewhat higher in Ireland (30% compared with 25% skipping a whole day in the past two weeks and 28% versus 22% skipping some classes). Other aspects of school engagement were otherwise broadly similar.

TABLE 2.11 LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL OF EXPECTATION TO GO ON TO DEGREE-LEVEL OR POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND (POOLED DATA) (ODDS RATIOS)

	Model 1	Model 2
Male	0.438***	0.485
Parental education:		
Upper secondary	1.535***	1.469***
Sub-degree	2.176***	2.033***
Degree or higher	4.872***	4.324***
Northern Ireland	0.770***	
School type:		
Non-grammar		0.396***
Voluntary secondary		0.838
Vocational		0.530***
Community-comprehensive		0.717*
(Ref.: Grammar school)		
School type*gender:		
Male*non-grammar		0.625*
Male*secondary		0.983
Male*vocational		1.015
Male*comm./comp.		0.816
Nagelkerke R^2	14.8	17.5

Source: PISA, own analyses.
Note: *** p<.001, * p<.01.

Fifteen-year-old students in Ireland were significantly more likely than those in Northern Ireland to expect to go on to higher education (58% compared with 49%) and to expect to obtain a higher status job, with an average ISEI score of 67 compared with 63.6. A logistic regression model (Table 2.11) allows us to examine the between-jurisdiction differences in educational expectations. Males and those whose parents have lower levels of education are less likely to expect to go on to

higher education.[24] Even controlling for these factors, expectations are significantly lower in Northern Ireland. Model 2 shows the extent to which these patterns vary across different types of school. Controlling for parental education and gender, the highest expectations are found among students attending grammar schools (in Northern Ireland) or voluntary secondary schools (in Ireland). The lowest expectations are found in non-grammar schools in Northern Ireland, with male students in these schools having significantly lower expectations than that of any other group.[25]

2.4.4 Skills in adulthood

PIAAC 2012 provides insights into the literacy and numeracy skills of the adult population. In both jurisdictions, there are no significant gender differences in average literacy scores but males tend to score significantly higher in the numeracy tests. Figure 2.17 shows patterns by highest level of educational attainment. In both settings, there is a clear gradient, with those with degree-level qualifications having higher literacy and numeracy scores than those with lower levels of education.[26] There is no significant difference in average scores between the two settings, except for higher numeracy scores among the post-secondary/sub-degree group in Northern Ireland compared with Ireland. The relative gap in scores between the highest and lowest educational groups is slightly larger in Northern Ireland than Ireland for both literacy and numeracy.

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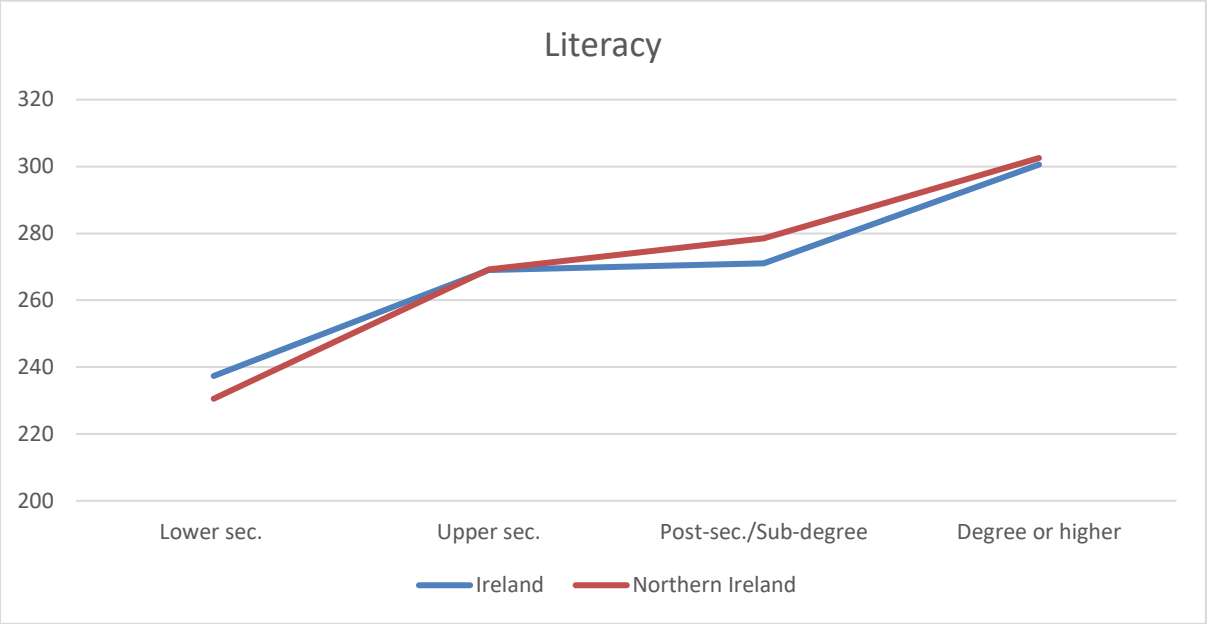
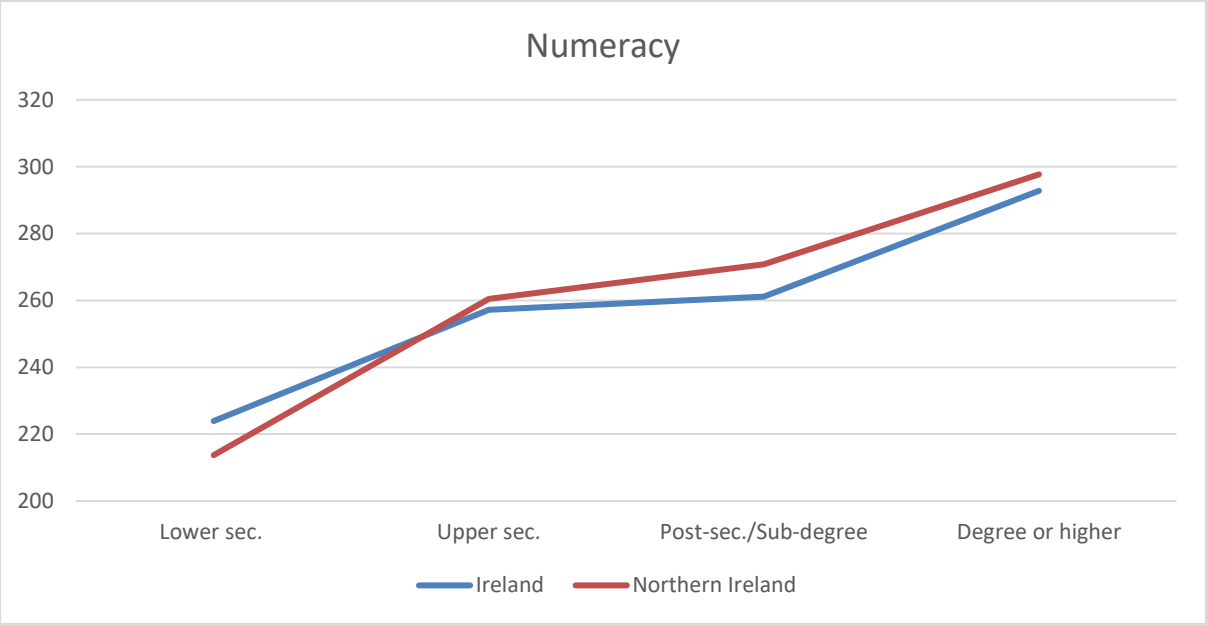
24 The coefficients are reported as odds ratios. An odds ratio of less than one indicates a reduced chance of expecting to go on to higher education while values of more than one indicate an increased chance.

25 Because it can be difficult to interpret interaction effects in logistic regression models (see Norton et al., 2004), separate models were also run for males and females. These confirmed the finding that the lowest expectations were found among males in non-grammar schools.

26 It should be noted that the educational classification is slightly different to that presented earlier in the chapter in order to have enough cases for analysis.

FIGURE 2.17 AVERAGE LITERACY AND NUMERACY SCORES BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND





Source: PIAAC 2012 data, own analyses.

2.5 DIFFERENCES IN RATES OF PAY AND THE RELATIVE RETURNS TO EDUCATION

Recent times have seen increased attention paid to the differences in living standards across the two regions. It can be difficult to get reliable measures due to differences in data collection approaches and peculiarities in national accounting frameworks, particularly when relying on per capita income measures. These difficulties in obtaining reliable measures of comparative income are discussed extensively in Bergin and McGuinness (2021), in which the authors conclude that

purchasing power parity (PPP) adjusted household disposable income is a reliable available metric of relative living standards. Using this metric, Bergin and McGuinness (2021) conclude that income levels are approximately 12% higher in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. However, given the recent debate on this issue, it is useful to explore some additional arguments related to the comparability of earnings or income data across the two jurisdictions.

2.5.1 PIAAC data advantages and caveats

The PIAAC data provide us with another very important insight into differences in living standards, as it constitutes a common survey-based measure of hourly earnings that has also been adjusted for differences in prices between Ireland and the UK. It is important to note that while total household income is made up of a number of elements, including labour market earnings, social welfare transfers and income from assets, the measure used here focuses exclusively on income from employment. As such, our measure will more closely reflect differences in productivity levels between both regions.

Within the field of labour economics, earnings from employment are considered to be the most crucial aspect in determining an individual's decision to invest in education. Higher rates of return to education will tend to incentivise greater investments in educational qualifications and differences in wage rates are often an important component in explaining differences in rates of educational attainment across countries or regions. However, this view is contested by sociologists, who maintain that the decision to invest in education is much more nuanced, with a range of factors impacting the choice. The often-cited work of Côté and Levine (1997) attributed the decision to continue with post-secondary education to five key factors: monetary gain and career progression; personal growth; to be in a position where they could help others; expectations from friends and family; and seeing university as better than the alternatives. Other theorists (see, for example, Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997) view educational decision making as reflecting the relative costs and benefits of participation for different social groups, with middle-class young people going on to higher education to avoid social demotion relative to the position of their parents. School factors, in particular the orientation of the school in terms of preparing students for higher education, have also been found to have a significant impact on young people's post-school pathways (Smyth and Banks, 2012).

PPP adjustment does not take explicit account of differences in housing costs. Bergin and McGuinness (2021) report that housing costs account for around 20% of disposable household income in both Northern Ireland and Ireland. However, these figures have attracted some criticism on the grounds that higher proportions of young people in Ireland live in the parental home, suggesting that average costs

are lower as they are spread over a greater number of household members. Eurostat data show that in 2018 in Ireland 41% of those aged 25-29 years lived with a parent. However, while the Irish figure has increased in recent years, it is by no means the highest in Europe (the figure is over 60% in Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Spain).[27] Furthermore, the 25-29 age group accounts for just 6% of the Irish population, so the fact that around 40% of this group live with their parents (as opposed to 25% based on the UK average)[28] will not have a large impact on overall household composition in Ireland compared to Northern Ireland. This would only be a factor if the pattern persisted into older age groups and raised overall average household size. The fact that average household sizes (2.5 in Northern Ireland and 2.7 in Ireland)[29,30] are broadly similar, based on 2016 estimates, suggests that this issue does not have a significant impact and that housing costs in both jurisdictions are similar when expressed as a share of disposable income.

Another potential weakness of the data is that the PPP adjustment is carried out for the UK, rather than Northern Ireland specifically. If there are large variations in price levels between regions, this will potentially result in some inaccuracies in the relative wage data. Data on relative regional consumer price levels (RRCPL) produced by ONS in 2016 indicated that average living costs were just 2.3% below the UK average,[31] suggesting that such regional disparities will have minimal distortionary impacts on the PPP adjustments used here. Nevertheless, we have re-adjusted the earnings data from PIAAC with this regional price index and inflated the Northern Ireland wage data by a factor of 2.3% to account for marginally lower prices (and greater purchasing power) in Northern Ireland compared to the UK average. Therefore, our wage estimates will now fully reflect regional differences in prices between Northern Ireland and Ireland. Based on the PIAAC data, this PPP re-adjustment has the impact of increasing average hourly earnings in Northern Ireland from $15.97 to $16.35.

It is often claimed that such a PPP adjustment may be flawed as it fails to take account of the fact that house prices in Northern Ireland lie well below the UK average, suggesting that the failure to explicitly account for this within a regional-specific PPP adjustment could have potential extortionary impacts on the data. However, this is a somewhat misleading argument as only a small proportion of

27 See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Young_people_-_social_inclusion&oldid=526294.

28 See https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/youngadultslivingwiththeirparents.

29 For Northern Ireland figure, see https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/ni-housing-stats-18-19-tables6.ODS.

30 For Ireland figure, see https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp4hf/cp4hf/hhlds/.

31 See https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/articles/relativeregionalconsumerpricelevelsuk/2016.

homeowners, or renters, will have housing costs that reflect current house prices. Housing costs will tend to be higher for new buyers; however, many households with long housing tenure tend to have lower mortgage costs. Within the rental sector, many households receive subsidies that reduce rents well below market value. Data from ONS for 2017 indicate that average household net weekly rents in Northern Ireland were £9.60 below the UK average and comparable to regions such as Humberside, the North-East, the North-West, Scotland, Wales and Yorkshire.[32] Average weekly mortgage repayments in 2017 were £11.90 below the UK average and broadly comparable to Scotland and the North-East.[33] This suggests that the issue of regional variations in housing costs, relative to the UK average, would not heavily impact our estimates if they were incorporated into the PPP calculations.

2.5.2 Theoretical framework of educational investment decisions

Standard economic theory provides a framework by which we can understand why individual differentials in investments in education might exist between countries and regions. The standard framework used for explaining differing levels of investments in education is human capital theory (Becker, 1964). The typical human capital model assumes that an individual will participate in schooling up until the point where the present value of the nth year of schooling equals the cost. An individual will continue to invest in education up until the point where they can no longer enjoy a positive earnings return. Therefore, this theoretical framework suggests that countries and regions with higher returns to investment will have higher levels of educational attainment and schooling.[34]

2.5.3 Earnings and returns to schooling by level of schooling

Figure 2.18 plots average hourly earnings, PPP adjusted, by level of education in Northern Ireland and Ireland in 2014. It shows average hourly earnings in Ireland exceed those in Northern Ireland for all levels of educational attainment, with the gap appearing relatively constant throughout the educational distribution. Overall, hourly wages are 31% higher in Ireland compared to Northern Ireland. By education, mean hourly earnings favour Ireland by 33% for primary education, 38% for lower secondary education, 21% for upper secondary, 11% for post-secondary and 35% for a higher education.

The consistency in the earnings gap across education levels suggests that pay rates in Ireland are also consistently higher for most occupations.[35] Alternatively, differences in rates of pay may be partly explained by workers in Ireland having

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32 This figure is less housing benefits rebates and allowances.

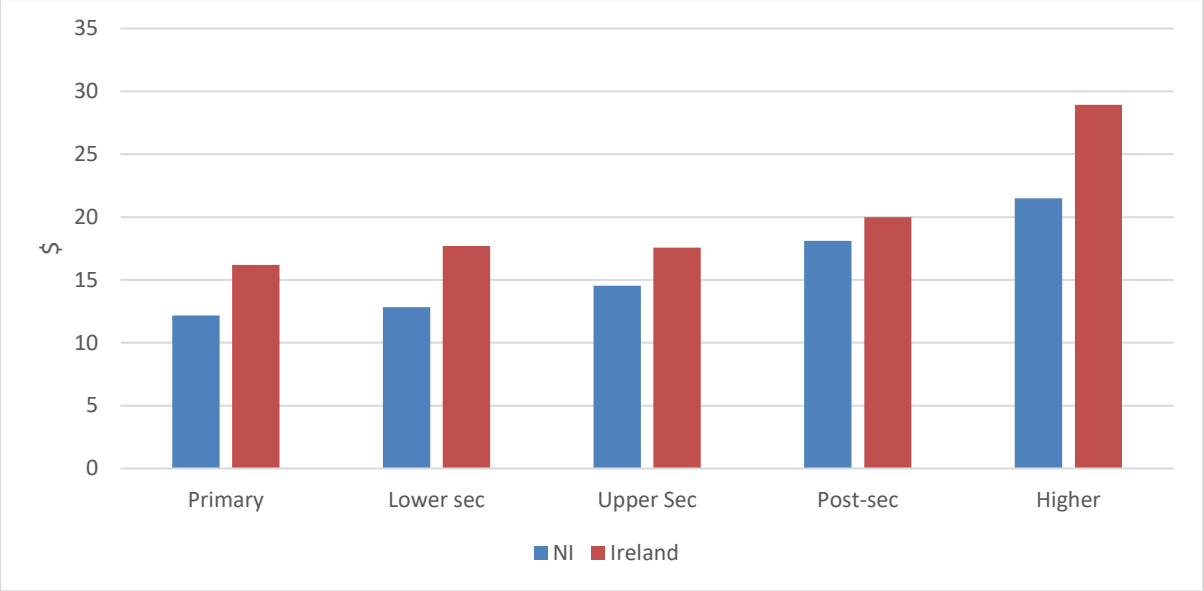
33 The data come from UK Housing Expenditures by countries and regions (ONS).

34 It is recognised other theoretical perspectives exist.

35 This is based on the well-established relationship between educational attainment and occupational entry requirements.

higher levels of occupational tenure and/or labour market experience. To get a more accurate measure of differences in the rates of return to education, we estimate a wage equation using a basic Mincer specification (Patrinos, 2016).

FIGURE 2.18 MEAN HOURLY EARNINGS BY EDUCATION, ADJUSTED FOR PURCHASING POWER PARITY



Source: PIAAC data, own analyses.
Notes: Number of observations: Northen Ireland: 2,007; Ireland: 2,769.

We begin by estimating a model using Equation 1. The dependent variable is the log of hourly earnings, while 'exp' is a measure of labour market experience.[36] A polynomial of this term is also included to reflect the convex relationship between experience and earnings. 'Sch' is a variable measuring educational attainment and the coefficient β_1 measures the percentage difference between the return to a given level of schooling and the reference category, which in this case will be primary-level educational attainment. It can be shown that the β_1 coefficient will approximate the rate of return to education consistent with human capital theory (see McGuinness, 2006). We begin by estimating Equation 1 for both jurisdictions separately, with the results shown in Table 2.11.

$$lnW_i = \alpha + \beta_1 Sch + \beta_2 exp + \beta_3 exp2 + \varepsilon \qquad (1)$$

In both regions, the pattern of educational returns seems very similar; for instance, in both Northern Ireland and Ireland, individuals with lower secondary attainment earn around 10% more than those educated to primary level only. At the upper end of the spectrum, in both jurisdictions individuals with third-level qualifications earn around 65% more per hour than those educated to primary level only. The only marked difference between the pattern of returns in both labour markets

[36] Labour market experience is measured by the number of years an individual has been in employment.

relates to post-secondary attainment, where the wage premium appears significantly higher in Northern Ireland compared to Ireland.

TABLE 2.12 EARNINGS EQUATION, NORTHERN IRELAND AND IRELAND, 2014

	Hourly wage PPP corrected	
	Northern Ireland	**Ireland**
Experience	0.037***	0.044***
Experience squared	-0.001***	-0.001***
Primary (ref)	0.000	0.000
Lower secondary	0.094**	0.114*
Upper secondary	0.259***	0.220***
Post secondary	0.447***	0.303***
Higher	0.648***	0.684***
N	*2,005*	*2,769*
R2	*0.370*	*0.340*

Note: *** p<0.01 ** p<0.05 * p<0.1

While Equation 1 provides important insights, it does not allow us to directly compare wage returns to levels of education in Northern Ireland and Ireland. In order to do this, we estimate a model using pooled data for both areas and estimate Equation 2 (Table 2.13). By interacting education level with an Ireland dummy variable, we can now generate a set of educational coefficients for both regions that all relate to a common reference case: primary level educational attainment in Northern Ireland. We can see that the Northern Ireland coefficients align directly with Table 2.12, although there will be some variation due to the fact that the intercept term will be different compared to Equation 2. Focusing on the Northern Ireland coefficients, those with lower secondary schooling again earn a 10% premium relative to those with primary education, while Northern Ireland graduates again earn a return of approximately 66%. However, crucially, Table 2.13 now lets us also compare earnings in Ireland to the reference case; for instance, an employee in Ireland with lower secondary level education earned a premium in 2014 of 38% relative to the Northern Ireland reference category, contrasting with a premium of 10% for employees in Northern Ireland educated to lower secondary level. Relative to the Northern Ireland reference case, employees with third-level qualifications in Ireland earn a premium of 95%, which compares to a premium of 66% among Northern Ireland employees educated to third level.

We can get a much clearer picture of relative returns from Table 2.14, which reports the results of post-estimation tests comparing the estimated rates of return from Table 2.11 for similar levels of schooling in the respective jurisdictions. It is very clear that the returns to education in Ireland substantially exceed those in Northern Ireland at all levels of educational attainment. This is true even at low levels of educational attainment; for instance, employees educated to the two lowest levels of schooling (primary and lower secondary) earn 27 and 29 percentage points respectively more in Ireland. At the other end of the spectrum, employees with third-level qualifications earn a premium that is nearly 30 percentage points higher than their counterparts in Northern Ireland. The premium is somewhat lower for workers holding upper secondary and post-secondary qualifications; however, they remain substantial, standing at 22 and 12 percentage points respectively. The results again support previous analysis that concluded that productivity levels in Northern Ireland lie substantially below those of Ireland.[37] Lower productivity jobs will tend to place a wage ceiling on workers, irrespective of their capabilities, and this is likely to an important explanation for the large differentials in the returns to education that we observe here.

$$lnW_i = \alpha + \beta_1 Sch * RoI + \beta_2 exp + \beta_3 exp2 + \varepsilon \qquad (2)$$

[37] Differences in job types and in the importance of various sectors in the two jurisdictions may also play a part in explaining the differences in wages; however, this could also be reverse causality in that sectors with high productivity and high wages may be more likely to locate in Ireland as a result of the highly educated population. The same can be said for the higher levels of FDI in Ireland.

TABLE 2.13 EARNINGS EQUATIONS, NORTHERN IRELAND AND IRELAND, 2014, POOLED MODEL

		Hourly
	Experience	0.042***
	Experience squared	-0.001***
Northern Ireland	Primary (ref)	0.000
	Lower secondary	0.096*
	Upper secondary	0.268***
	Post secondary	0.451***
	Higher	0.655***
Ireland	Primary	0.269***
	Lower secondary	0.384***
	Upper secondary	0.485***
	Post secondary	0.571***
	Higher	0.950***
	N	*4,774*
	R2	0.39

Note: *** p<0.01 ** p<0.05 * p<0.1

TABLE 2.14 DIFFERENCES IN RATES OF RETURN

	Rate of return relative to Northern Ireland primary		
	Northern Ireland	**Ireland**	**Percentage point difference in rate of return**
Primary	*Reference*	27%	27***
Lower secondary	10%	39%	29***
Upper secondary	27%	49%	22***
Post-secondary	45%	57%	12***
Higher	66%	95%	29***

Note: *** p<0.01 ** p<0.05 * p<0.1

2.6 CONCLUSION

Levels of educational attainment in Ireland and Northern Ireland have increased in recent times, although the improvements have been much greater in Ireland. In 2019, 41% of the working-age population in Ireland had a high level of education compared to 36% in Northern Ireland. Looking at those aged 25-34 years to provide a better representation of the current output of the education system, Ireland again outperforms Northern Ireland in terms of attainment; 7% of this age group in Ireland attained a low education compared to 18% in Northern Ireland. Ireland has seen considerable improvements in this regard in the last 15 years, which have not been seen in Northern Ireland. These figures use EU-LFS data and we also look at attainment using PIAAC data which use five categories of qualifications. PIAAC data show that having no more than a primary education is more than five times more likely in Northern Ireland among young people (25-29 years) than it is in Ireland. The most striking difference is in those who complete a post-secondary (but not degree-level) qualification; 30% of those of a working age hold such a qualification in Ireland compared to only 11% in Northern Ireland. When we look at the younger age cohort, this pattern for post-secondary qualifications holds. This pattern has significant implications for vocational/intermediate skill development in the two settings.

Early school leaving is also examined given the importance for future employability, potential earnings and broader life chances. Three different measures of early school leaving are presented, with rates being considerably higher in Northern Ireland regardless of the definition used. Based on the OECD definition (the proportion of those aged 16-24 years not in education who have a lower secondary or below education level), 14% of those in Northern Ireland are early school leavers compared to 6% in Ireland. We then look at those not in education, employment, or training more broadly (the NEET rate), and find little difference between the two jurisdictions, with NEET approximately 21% in both.

In spite of marked differences in qualification profiles, broadly similar patterns of skill development are found in the two jurisdictions at primary and secondary levels and among the adult population. Among adults, despite differences in the level of educational attainment between the two settings, there are remarkable similarities in literacy and numeracy skills at a given educational level.

An important focus of the current study is on the extent to which educational outcomes are socially differentiated in the two settings. There is a well-documented body of literature on the relationship between social background and education and other economic outcomes. In both jurisdictions, literacy, numeracy and science test scores are socially differentiated, being higher among those with graduate mothers and those from the highest income quintile families. However, we find using PIAAC data that social background is a much stronger predictor of educational attainment in Northern Ireland than is the case in Ireland. These findings suggest the (negative) impact of academic selection in Northern Ireland and the (positive) impact of the DEIS programme in supporting schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged students in Ireland, issues which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Exam performance in the two jurisdictions is then examined with reference to social background. At both lower and upper secondary levels, students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Northern Ireland and Ireland achieve much lower exam grades than other students.

Taking the findings on educational attainment and academic performance in tandem, it is evident that the two systems differ in the way in which inequality is manifest in educational outcomes. Intergenerational educational mobility rates are found to be lower in Northern Ireland than in Ireland, with lower levels of parental education being much more predictive of early school leaving in Northern Ireland. In Ireland, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to stay in school until the end of upper secondary education but social differentiation in the grades received is more evident than in the Northern Irish context. This reflects the fact that in Northern Ireland those who may have achieved poorer grades leave the education system before reaching this level while those who would be higher performers and who are from less disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to stay on. A smaller proportion of 15 year olds in Northern Ireland plan to go on to higher education, a pattern that largely reflects lower expectations among those, especially male, students attending non-grammar schools.

Chapter 3 draws on interviews with policy stakeholders in an effort to unpack the factors underlying these patterns.

CHAPTER 3
Stakeholder perspectives

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on 31 interviews with 35 stakeholders from government departments, state agencies, school management bodies and teacher unions in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Their accounts are placed in the context of previous research on education in Ireland and Northern Ireland, in an attempt to unpack the findings presented in Chapter 2. In the context of a lack of comparative research on Ireland and Northern Ireland, these interviews provide rich insights into the commonalities across and differences between the two jurisdictions. Not surprisingly, stakeholder perspectives can differ depending on their position (for example, an education union versus a government department) but the focus here is on identifying the key themes emerging from their accounts, highlighting perceptions of current policies as well as likely directions for the future.

Section 3.2 outlines perceptions of primary and secondary education while further and higher education are explored in Sections 3.3 and 3.4 respectively. Section 3.5 examines existing patterns of North–South co-operation and stakeholder perceptions of the potential for further engagement in the future.

3.2 PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

3.2.1 Primary education system

Discussions of the primary system in Ireland have centred on two main issues: curriculum reform and the governance of primary schools. The primary school curriculum has been in place since 1999, covering six broad subject areas and emphasising the child as an active agent in their own learning. Research has shown less emphasis on play-based learning in the early years than originally envisaged, as well as challenges around class size and classroom layout in facilitating the kind of group-work and interactive activities that children find engaging (Darmody et al., 2010; McCoy et al., 2012; Smyth, 2018). The curriculum has since been reviewed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), leading to changes being made in the languages and maths curricula. Consultations are currently underway on a revised curriculum framework to respond to new insights on children's development and learning, and the need to emphasise student wellbeing and develop new skills (such as coding) (NCCA, 2020).

Another area for policy debate in Ireland has centred on the governance of schools. The vast majority (89%) of primary schools are under Catholic patronage, though in recent years there has been a growth in the number of multidenominational

Educate Together and Community National Schools. Research has pointed to the mismatch between the profile of schools and the religious profile of the population and the challenges for children from minority belief groups in attending Catholic schools (Darmody et al., 2016; Faas et al., 2016).

The primary curriculum in Northern Ireland, which was revised in 2007, places an emphasis on providing a broad and balanced curriculum, covering six areas of learning (CCEA, 2007). The curriculum aims to foster cross-curricular skills (such as communication) and thinking skills (such as problem-solving), and is divided into three stages at primary level. One small-scale study (Greenwood, 2013) indicated that teachers were broadly positive about the use of these new cross-curricular approaches. Shewbridge et al. (2014), in a review for the OECD, also noted positive feedback from stakeholders on the revised curriculum. However, commentators (see, for example, Henderson et al., 2020) have noted the absence of systematic evaluation of primary curricular reform. Primary school governance in Northern Ireland is largely divided on a religious basis, with a small group of integrated schools. Research has focused on the implications of this model at both primary and secondary levels for student outcomes and broader community cohesion (Borooah and Knox, 2015; Duffy and Gallagher, 2017; Milliken et al., 2020).

3.2.2 Secondary education system

Curriculum reform is also a dominant theme in Irish secondary education, with the recent reform of the junior cycle (lower secondary) and a review currently underway of senior cycle (upper secondary). Research has pointed to the backwash effect of the high-stakes Leaving Certificate exam, leading to a narrower experience of teaching and learning and the neglect of higher-order thinking and broader life skills (Smyth et al., 2011; Smyth et al., 2019). Preparation for the exams is found to impact on student wellbeing, with high levels of stress, especially among females (Banks and Smyth, 2015). Young people report a mismatch between their school-based learning and the independent learning expected of them in further and higher education, contributing to transition difficulties (McCoy et al., 2014a). While there is ongoing debate about the potential role of any school-based assessment at senior cycle, there appears to be a consensus among students, parents and teachers around the need to use a broader range of assessment methods and to move away from a focus on a single period of assessment at the end of upper secondary education (Smyth et al., 2019).

The different secondary school sectors (voluntary secondary, Education and Training Boards (ETBs), community and comprehensive) differ in their funding and governance structures but operate within a common curriculum and assessment system. School choice is very active in Ireland, with around half of the cohort not attending their nearest (or most accessible) secondary school, resulting in significant differences in the social background and prior achievement of their

student population (Hannan et al., 1996; Smyth et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2018). The concentration of disadvantage in certain schools has been found to negatively impact the academic performance and broader socioemotional wellbeing of young people (McCoy et al., 2014b; Smyth, 2019; Smyth, 2020), with a policy response to target resources and supports towards these schools (see below).

In Northern Ireland, a dominant theme in policy discourse and research has centred on the impact of academic selection on student experiences and outcomes. A largescale multi-strand study (Gallagher and Smith, 2000) indicated a large 'grammar school effect', whereby achievement levels were heavily influenced by being selected into the grammar school sector, with clear consequences for young people's post-16 pathways (see also Borooah and Knox, 2015; McMurray, 2020). The study also revealed a backwash effect on primary schools, with teachers in the final year of primary education focusing on preparation for the transfer test and narrowing the curriculum coverage in response. Furthermore, students reported feelings of fear and anxiety around taking the test (Leonard and Davey, 2001; NICCY, 2010). Test preparation often involves private tuition outside school, with take-up rates higher among higher income groups and such tuition conferring an advantage in grammar school access (Jerrim and Sim, 2019). At the school level, the consequence of academic selection has been a longer tail of lower-achieving schools than is the case in England, Wales or Scotland (Gallagher and Smith, 2000). Selection by standardised test scores results not only in a difference by prior achievement but a concentration of disadvantage in secondary (non-grammar) schools (Jerrim and Sim, 2019; McMurray, 2020; Brown et al., 2021). Policy discussions around the removal of selection in the early 2000s reached a political impasse, with a resulting system of two unregulated parallel sets of tests used to determine grammar school entry (Gallagher, 2021; McMurray, 2020).

Like Ireland, the presence of high-stakes exams at GCSE and A levels is found to have a backwash effect on student educational experiences, with young people reporting feelings of pressure and stress in the run-up to the exam (Canavan, 2021). Shewbridge et al. (2014) point to a mismatch between the skills-based curriculum previously studied by young people and the focus on preparing for GCSE exams, with OECD (2020) recommending a move towards a range of diverse assessments. At the time of writing, Northern Ireland is entering into an independent review of the whole educational system.

3.2.3 Perceptions of the educational systems as a whole

In the qualitative interviews, there were numerous differences highlighted between the education systems, as well as numerous commonalities between the two, with one stakeholder suggesting:

> *There certainly are significant differences, but at the end of the day the teacher standing in front of the kids is teaching largely in a similar manner, addressing largely similar needs using largely similar methods to their colleagues in the South. (Stakeholder, NI)*

There was an emerging theme whereby stakeholders often felt that the purpose of the education system was not always clearly articulated, meaning that teachers were often called upon to deal with a broad range of needs, an issue that has been documented in other contexts (Ball, 2021; Sewell and Newman, 2014; Brighouse, 2006). A stakeholder in Northern Ireland said:

> *Society needs to come to a consensus about [what] it wants – either that's ten GCSEs and people going on to uni or well-rounded and developed young people who contribute to society. (Stakeholder, NI)*

In Ireland, the same idea was articulated by another stakeholder who suggested:

> *We're doing a really good job preparing people for a whole range of things. Part of the difficulty is I'm not sure whether society really knows what it wants from the education system, and I think to some extent we do need a national discussion about this … Schools become responsible for teaching about water safety, schools become responsible for teaching about sexuality education … They are responsible for everything. The problem is schools are not resourced and, in many cases, teachers are not trained to provide education for absolutely everything. (Stakeholder, IE)*

The tension between the system's role in fostering holistic development and the exam-focused nature of assessment was felt most acutely in the secondary sector, an issue which is discussed in greater detail below.

Perhaps not surprisingly, it was felt very strongly by several stakeholders in both jurisdictions that education needs more funding. In Northern Ireland, several commentators described a relative decline in funding in recent years.

> *Every school of every school type in Northern Ireland is struggling financially. … You know those schools who were doing well and actually balancing their budget two or three years ago are now no longer doing that. So issue number one is finance and actually outside all of the other issues flow from that. So you've got resource issues. You've got support issues. (Stakeholder, NI)*

> *We have lower levels of funding per pupil compared to other parts of the UK … so real pressure on budgets and relative underfunding. …. I*

> *think the impact has been evident in schools and we have had principals talking about the pressures that they have in terms of maintaining their staffing and maintaining materials and so forth in schools. (Stakeholder, NI)*

Data on school spending per student indicate that the levels in Northern Ireland have fallen significantly behind those in England and Wales since 2015, with levels in Scotland increasing relative to the other jurisdictions (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2020).

In Ireland, many of the stakeholders quoted the OECD data (2021) on education funding, which finds that Ireland spends less per capita on education than the OECD or EU averages:

> *If we want to get to OECD averages the Irish education budget is down just over €3 billion every year. If you want to look at EU averages, you're talking nearer four and a half billion every year. (Stakeholder, IE)*

Many also pointed out that the Irish education system performs very well, producing good outcomes despite being underfunded:

> *If you look at the OECD figures for spending on education, we are way down at the bottom. I think we may be bottom at the moment among all the OECD countries for spending on education as a proportion of our GDP, or as a proportion of total government spending. I think things like the quality of teachers and the quality of teaching makes up for a lot of resource shortages and financial shortages. You know the class sizes being too big. I think there's still a lot of barriers to overcome in Southern education. (Stakeholder, IE)*

Commentators pointed to the strong performance of both Ireland and Northern Ireland in international assessment studies.

> *The comparisons that we have on the international level, whether it's through the TIMMS [Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study] and PIRLS [Progress in International Reading Literacy Study] results at primary school or PISA at post primary. There is evidence that we perform at a high level but actually particularly in reading, but also in maths and science. So we think we can look and say in international comparison, the system is performing well. (Stakeholder, NI)*

> *The Northern Ireland system by any measure that's out there does very well in literacy, does very well in reading skills and does very well in the value that society places on education. And these are things that are sought after in other countries so we can't lose that. It does reasonably well in mathematical skills, not as well as it's doing in the literacy and the reading. (Stakeholder, NI)*

Another commonality between the two jurisdictions is the gender balance of teachers and particularly the gender balance in positions of leadership within schools:

> *The gender stuff manifests itself in some strange ways. It doesn't appear to be an issue in terms of examination outcomes and if there was a gender inequality there it's boys who are suffering. But in teaching 60% are female but if you look at the number of principals and senior teachers across the system then there's a disproportionate number of males in positions of leadership. (Stakeholder, NI)*

It was also felt by some stakeholders that a more diverse range of teachers not just in terms of gender but also in terms of social background would be beneficial for students. For example, one stakeholder in Northern Ireland suggested that teaching needs to be seen as a career option for those from disadvantaged backgrounds:

> *[T]rying to get young people into education, into actually teaching, who have experience of life that is different and therefore can empathise with the children. (Stakeholder, NI)*

3.2.4 Primary education

Stakeholders in both jurisdictions were broadly positive about the primary curriculum, contrasting it positively with that at secondary level (see below).

> *It's how to use those skills in higher-order thinking, critical problem solving, collaborative exercise, that seems to be developing well in primary but not developing as well in the post primary. (Stakeholder, NI)*

> *We have a very … strong skills-based, skills and knowledge mixture-based curriculum, very forward thinking and all of that right through primary school Key Stage 3. But a bit of a disconnect then with the GCSE, which is very knowledge based. Key Stage 4 assessment doesn't sit comfortably with our curriculum that came before. (Stakeholder, NI)*

At the time of writing, work was ongoing on reviewing the primary curriculum in Ireland to focus more on a framework approach:

> *The primary curriculum will be a framework [and] … outline like the key objectives, what's the philosophy of primary education here? What do we want for our children? And then there'll be curricular areas and it will be a learning outcomes approach. And that is a new trend also in education and it's global … to frame a curriculum in terms of learning outcomes rather than content to be taught. (Stakeholder, IE)*

This commentator highlighted the importance in implementing the new curriculum of '*giving teachers the time and space to work with the learning outcomes*'.

Another emerging theme, which was expressed in both jurisdictions, relates to the consequences of school size and class sizes. In some cases, there are very large class sizes, with Ireland having the '*largest class sizes in the Eurozone*' (Stakeholder, IE).[38] Both jurisdictions have some very small schools and in Northern Ireland the policy appears to be to reduce the number of small schools, which was seen as having led to increasing class sizes in the remaining schools. The concern raised among stakeholders in Ireland is that decisions appear to be made based on cost rather than on what is deemed most appropriate for students.

> *Looking at small schools that are unsustainable in terms of the six areas – financial, leadership, numbers, enrolment and so on and also composite classes. The idea that two or three year groups in one class is maybe less quality for the children that experience that than if they move through the years in different classes with different teachers. (Stakeholder, NI)*

> *Two-thirds of primary schools have six teachers or less, which again doesn't augur well for sharing collaborative practice, developing expertise, etc., because each school is trying to teach the full curriculum to the full breadth of ages, from infants to sixth, and so on. So that doesn't make the job easy for teachers, and particularly the increasing expectations that parents in society have of schools and teachers. (Stakeholder, IE)*

In the consultation process with stakeholders, several issues were raised in relation to the primary sector, some of which were raised in key informant interviews and others which had not been raised previously. A principal area of policy concern was

[38] OECD (2021) indicate that Ireland has the largest class sizes at primary level among all European countries except the UK. Figures are provided for the UK as a whole rather than for the four jurisdictions separately.

that of special education, with discussants perceiving that provision was more challenging in Northern Ireland than in Ireland. Another issue raised is the lack of qualified substitute teachers, which was seen as a real problem in Ireland, while in Northern Ireland the perception was that there is an over-supply of teachers.[39]

Discussants indicated that there were 'capacity talks' underway to resolve issues around substitute teaching and that there has been some North–South ministerial interaction on the matter. However, as indicated during our key informant interviews, bureaucratic differences relating to the registration of teachers in both jurisdictions are seen to impede cross-border flows. It was also felt that there might not be an appetite for reform of the substitute teaching system. In the context of the pandemic, a main priority for schools, in both jurisdictions, has been to keep both the children and staff safe and 'ticking over'.

A further issue raised was that teachers in Northern Ireland are not getting enough support for refugee children and/or those children for whom English is an additional language. Related to this, there was a perception among stakeholders that in Northern Ireland Catholic schools are taking in more refugee children than schools in the controlled (largely Protestant) sector.[40] Analyses of published Department of Education data (for 2019/2020) conducted for this report indicate that the proportion of 'newcomers' (students with English as an additional language) is much higher in the non-grammar sector (with newcomers making up an average of 4.6% of students in secondary schools and 0.7% of those in grammar schools). Among secondary schools, newcomer representation is higher in Catholic Maintained and Controlled Integrated schools than in other school types.

With respect to commonalities, it was felt that achievement rates across the two jurisdictions are very good in reading, maths and science and that both primary sectors perform very well at an international level. Stakeholders highlighted a number of challenges. In Ireland, curriculum reform has been very slow; specifically, the NCCA has been undertaking a curriculum review that has been ongoing for a number of years. Other challenges relate to the level of increased diversity in schools, wellbeing following COVID-19 and new issues around gender

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39 However, views on this differed in Northern Ireland, with one stakeholder arguing that while there were more graduates than full-time teaching positions each year these people were not unemployed; there is a high demand for teachers from Northern Ireland overseas, particularly in the Middle East, and many have job offers before completion of their studies. Substitute teachers are also a necessary part of the system; if every graduate got a full-time position upon graduating there would be no substitutes to cover sick leave, maternity leave etc., which would cause significant staffing problems for schools. This stakeholder also argued that issues around school budgets meant principals were cautious in hiring new permanent staff.

40 This is possibly due to refugees being more likely to settle in Catholic communities in Northern Ireland. Research which looked at the integration of Syrian refugees there found those who identified as Protestant, Unionist or British were more likely to hold negative attitudes towards Muslims (Lippard and McNamee, 2021; this has also been found for immigrants of other nationalities; see Michael and Devine, 2018).

fluidity arising for schools. These issues also raise challenges for teacher education, which must be responsive to the changing needs and profiles of the student body.

General levels of social inequality are evident in both systems and are reflected in how long pupils remain engaged within the educational system and in patterns of progression to higher level study. Related to this, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) model was much admired by participating primary specialists from Northern Ireland and it was acknowledged that equivalent levels of support were lacking there. An example was given of an inspector visiting a school in Northern Ireland where there was one additional support person for 300 pupils; it was felt that additional supports tended to be considerably higher, on average, in Ireland. However, participants in Ireland also felt that there were important lessons to be learned from the primary system in Northern Ireland, particularly from its focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and robotics. In terms of North–South collaboration, some examples of a number of existing collaborative projects were outlined. However, it was felt that the level of collaboration could be increased and that there was a need to examine models of existing best practice of North–South educational co-operation.

> *The primary curriculum in the South is 20 years old and Ireland is a very different country from where we were 20 years ago, we are more diverse. (Stakeholder, consultation event)*

> *In the South, there's a perception that there is an appropriate level of teachers and additional support for DEIS schools and that this is not matched in the North. (Stakeholder, consultation event)*

3.2.5 Secondary education

Stakeholders across both settings were mostly critical of the exam-focused nature of secondary education, criticising the way in which exam preparation reduces the opportunity to develop a broader set of skills. In both jurisdictions, it was felt by stakeholders that the education system had become a place solely aimed at getting people to university, increasingly so as individuals moved through the school system.

Commentators often contrasted the nature of primary and secondary education. One stakeholder in Northern Ireland felt that primary education was very strong and was based on skills and knowledge but as a student progressed there was a move to a solely knowledge-based curriculum and that assessment did not align with the curriculum. Thus, they felt 'Key Stage 4' assessment did not '*really assess the skills needed for the 21st century*'. They went on to say:

> *It's not education, it's an exam factory. There's not a lot of room for them [21st century skills] if you're drilling for stats, if you're drilling for exams, every minute of every day is covering the curriculum for the purpose of passing a bloody exam. If you had a less pressurised system, there should be more room, you would think, for developing the rounded individual that business and the world of work says it wants. (Stakeholder, NI)*

> *A very, very narrow educational performance target … it's only got one and that's five GCSEs A stars to Cs so everything is driven to meet the target. There's lots of game playing in there. (Stakeholder, NI)*

Similar concerns were expressed in Ireland where senior cycle (upper secondary) was seen as doing little to prepare young people for life after school.

> *The only worry that I have is that the senior cycle is too exam focused and there should be more focus on developing the soft skills that are needed … One of the things we could do, especially at senior-cycle level is do more to prepare the young adults (which is what they are) for the world of work, for the world of third level, by giving them that range of skills and shifting the focus from the very narrow terminal exam system. (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *Firstly, all learning is then focused on preparing for an exam and secondly it leaves so many behind because they're neither interested nor able to keep up with the rat race. (Stakeholder, IE)*

Although junior cycle reform was seen as having effected real change, the presence of terminal exam-based assessment was viewed as having an enduring impact on junior cycle teaching and learning:

> *When you go into junior cycle, the backwash effect of the final qualification really has an influence and I think once you go to senior cycle, I'm not sure that there's too many could argue that … It's really focused on that end-point qualification but that's cultural and social as much as it is anything else. (Stakeholder, IE)*

Another stakeholder from Ireland added that the system was struggling with '*the notion of teaching competencies and developing and fostering competencies rather than blocks of knowledge*', and that assessment of skills and competencies was more difficult.

Both systems were seen as highly focused on preparation for higher education, with this seen as the most valued route by young people and their parents, an issue discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. It was felt that this has resulted in

the later stages of secondary education not being very useful for individuals entering the world of work or dealing with everyday life:

> *So, if the question is how does the education system prepare you for the real world outside, I think that if we continue to go the road we're going, and we stay on the path we're on, it's not very well. (Stakeholder, IE)*

A number of commentators pointed to the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted policymakers and educators to reassess how performance could be measured:

> *Why is the Leaving Cert a three-hour written exam whether you're doing physics, English or French? It's because it's the cheapest way of examining and to have a physics exam in a lab or to have French as an oral exam is expensive. I think we're moving there, I think it is finally dawning. (Stakeholder, IE)*

Another stakeholder also suggested that COVID-19 places a spotlight on exams, offering an opportunity to consider how things may be done differently:

> *I think COVID has, you know, it's after shining a light on the fact that we didn't have a Leaving Cert for two years … and the world continued to spin. That can mean lots of things. Some people say that was an awful experience so we never want to do that again, and others will see it as well that just demonstrates that we can do things differently. (Stakeholder, IE)*

Both settings had different school types with varying governance arrangements and funding structures, especially at secondary level, though this particular landscape varied. One stakeholder in Northern Ireland recognised this was a problem for both jurisdictions:

> *The way our schools are organised is not helping … We have different sectors ... we have Maintained, Controlled, Irish medium, Integrated, Independent Voluntary grammars and really how cost effective is that? Surely we could do this much better and things aren't a whole lot different in the Republic. (Stakeholder, NI)*

A diversity of school types was seen as fostering competition between schools in any one area to attract students, with consequences for funding:

> *In the North, there's a particular policy area which requires work right away in my view and that is how our schools are funded. And at the*

> *moment in the North schools are funded on the basis of bums on seats, so there's a formula which is based on the number of children in the school. And surely it shouldn't be about the number of children in school, it should be on the quality of what is being offered to them you know that should be the determining factor. (Stakeholder, NI)*

Some commentators also referred to differences across school types in the kinds of supports available to schools.

In Ireland, stakeholders also referred to the impact of between-school competition, leading to decisions about school policy and practice based on attracting students rather than what is best for the school or the young people involved:

> *Schools competing with other schools expanded the number of subjects so that they were offering the same range as any other school. They would be called out for not doing it and put themselves under pressure. (Stakeholder, IE)*

This also had a gender element to it, especially in Ireland where Education and Training Boards (ETB) schools might compete with neighbouring single-sex schools. While a school for girls was very unlikely to offer metalwork or materials technology (woodwork), it was suggested that the ETB schools have to do their best to compromise and offer everything 'even if it hurt'.

Although both systems have a diversity of school types at secondary level, the main difference relates to the use of academic selection to determine school allocation in Northern Ireland. Despite a large body of academic research indicating that academic selection only benefits a small minority and disadvantages the rest of the student body (most recently, Brown et al., 2021), children in Northern Ireland continue to take selection tests at age 11 before entering either secondary or grammar schools based on their performance. The Costello report (2004) found social disadvantage to be perpetuated through the academic selection system. In 2015/2016, despite 40% of all Year 8 pupils attending a grammar school, only 17% of those who were entitled to free school meals did so (Perry, 2016).[41,42]

In our interviews with a range of stakeholders in Northern Ireland, we found the general consensus to be an opposition to academic selection, mainly due to its impact on socio-economic inequality and on young people's wellbeing. The OECD

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41 Year 8 is the first year of post-primary education.

42 Take-up of free school meals is often used as a proxy for deprivation (see Chapter 2).

has also maintained that academic selection leads to 'clear structural challenges to equity' (Shewbridge et al, 2014).

> *We don't have a private school system here because we have grammar schools which do the same flipping thing and cater for the same cohort of kids. So, our academic selective system isn't the only thing that ails our education system, but it has a huge role to play. It saps energy, it saps money, it saps debate and it tells children that they're not good enough at the age of 11 … Everyone thinks that going to a nonselective school means you're not good enough. (Stakeholder, NI)*

> *Selection is the problem. If you want to improve the chances of disadvantaged young people, the worst thing you can do is concentrate them all on the same schools. (Stakeholder, NI)*

> *When you get to second level, the social segregation gets a lot worse and something like 43% go to grammar schools and what that leaves is secondary schools that … have too much disadvantage to deal with, too many special educational needs. (Stakeholder, NI)*

> *Getting the '11 Plus' is quality education. Something else will do the rest of them. So that does not encourage social mobility. (Stakeholder, NI)*

For context, it should be noted that grammar schools have significantly increased the proportion of the transferring population that they admit as the cohort of school-age young people has decreased due to changing demographics (Northern Ireland Department of Education, 2021). Prior to this, students with relatively high transfer grades who did not meet the criteria for a grammar school attended a secondary school. However, as numbers of children fell and the grammar schools increasingly took those with lower grades, this led to significant difficulties for secondary schools on top of the issues already placed upon them by academic selection (Gallagher and Smith, 2000).

While it was found to be detrimental to the education system and despite many parents disapproving of academic selection, stakeholders believed parents are worried about detrimentally impacting their child by not applying to grammar schools, which are seen as having much better exam performance than the secondary schools in Northern Ireland. A report from the Northern Ireland Research and Information Service (Perry, 2016) found, 'There is evidence that many parents deem entry to grammar schools as prestigious, while others may oppose selection but feel bound to enter their children to the unregulated tests in order to gain access to certain high-performing schools'. One of the stakeholders interviewed offered a similar view:

> *The biggest challenge will be to convince parents that the alternative is good for the aspirations that they have for their children. Every parent, regardless, wants the best for their kids. We have taught them that a grammar school is the best for their kids. Whether they could go to grammar school or not. So we need to convince them and show them that there is an alternative that will fulfil their children's potential. (Stakeholder, NI)*

The differences in exam performance between secondary schools and grammar schools are well documented in Northern Ireland and while there are very high results in Northern Ireland, it masks a very 'long tail of underachievement' (Walker, cited in Perry, 2016).

While there was considerable consensus among those interviewed about the negative impact of academic selection, stakeholders expressed pessimism about the likelihood of change coming about:

> *Attitudes towards selection differ, sometimes in almost traditional ways. It's almost between the two communities. … There's not going to be political consensus on this at any time in the near future. (Stakeholder, NI)*

In Ireland, secondary schools are not allowed to select students on the basis of academic ability. However, there is quite active school choice, resulting in a good deal of variation between schools in social background and in prior achievement (Hannan et al., 1996; Smyth et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2018). Interestingly, stakeholders did not discuss the issue of school choice to any great extent, though they did refer to the consequences of the concentration of socio-economic disadvantage in some schools (see below).

Among specialists from the post-primary sector who attended the consultation, there was a focus on the challenges related to inclusive education, particularly in terms of social disadvantage. It was recognised this was a common policy concern in both jurisdictions and that, unless policymakers equip themselves with knowledge about the dynamics and factors driving educational inequality, there is likely to be little progress. With respect to the challenges facing the secondary system in the area of social disadvantage, it was recognised that there are differing approaches to addressing the issue both between, and within, jurisdictions. An important matter arising from this is the extent to which policy learning and policy sharing actually takes place in terms of the various approaches being adopted. In order to measure policy impact, there needs to be a consensus on how we measure success in approaches to tackling social disadvantage and what are the most appropriate metrics, and data, for capturing this. While the discussants had no immediate answers to such challenges, they felt that such issues needed to be

more explicit in any discussions, or considerations, of educational inclusion policy. A practical example of the difficulties in the area is exemplified by the lack of data and metrics that would allow policymakers to effectively unpack the apparent higher levels of under-achievement among working-class Protestant boys in Northern Ireland.

The discussants also identified the need for a greater discourse on the role of community engagement in addressing educational policy issues and the challenges in achieving, and sustaining, such engagement. Furthermore, it was acknowledged that while we can observe differential outcomes between different types of schools within and across jurisdictions, there is a significant lack of data and research on the extent to which differential outcomes can occur within schools. In terms of co-operation and mutual learning, questions were raised around the exam-based focus of GCSEs in Northern Ireland and the potential benefits of a move to a more lower stakes focus, such as is currently the case now with the 2015 Framework for Junior Cycle in Ireland. There was also some discussion of a potential transition year in Northern Ireland between lower and upper secondary education, which has been open to students in Ireland since the 1990s (and in some schools, as far back as the 1970s), as it was felt that the transition year system has been effective in keeping children engaged in education. The extension of a transition year type arrangement to Northern Ireland was discussed as a possible strategy that could be considered to address the problem of higher levels of early school leaving.

> *Challenge[s] to good policy are: do the metrics work? How do I identify good and not so good outcomes? How do we know this is good value for money going into that sphere of education policy and not into other spheres? (Stakeholder, consultation event)*

> *When you have communities that are fractured by poverty, fractured by social exclusion, fractured by politics, fractured by a legacy of conflict, how do you sustain community engagement with this process? (Stakeholder, consultation event)*

> *One of the key strengths of the transition year in the South has been the fact that it has, to put it crudely, kept kids in school. If we are talking about retention and reducing early school leaving, this may be a model which could be very, very applicable, particularly in the Northern context and the much higher levels of early school leaving. (Stakeholder, consultation event)*

3.2.6 Inclusion

Stakeholders were asked about two forms of inclusion – the extent to which there are unequal educational outcomes based on socio-economic disadvantage and the nature of provision for children and young people with special educational needs/disabilities.

3.2.6.1 Educational inequality

In both jurisdictions, stakeholders commented on the existence of educational inequality, the challenges for schools serving these communities and the longer-term consequences of failing to tackle these inequalities.

> *We do have issues where we have a significant number of young people who are not achieving, who are disengaged from the system. (Stakeholder, NI)*

> *In some areas … there is extreme disadvantage, talking about lots of poverty but also crime, drugs, just a lot of social issues. (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *Fractures become chasms become crevasses over time so fix the fractures. (Stakeholder, NI)*

The two systems were, however, quite different in the focus and nature of the policy response. In Ireland, the policy focus and evaluation measures have been on the gap in attainment between schools with and without a concentration of social disadvantage. In Northern Ireland, routinely-reported statistics relate to the achievement gap between socially disadvantaged individual students and others. There, school funding has a 'Targeting Social Need' component giving additional resources to schools divided into three bands on the basis of the proportion of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, assessed as being in receipt of free school meals (Department of Education, 2019).[43] Additional funding is also given to schools in respect of Traveller, migrant and looked-after (in care) children. Recently, the report of the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland (2021) made recommendations suggesting an increased focus on early years education, an emphasis on socioemotional wellbeing, improved curriculum relevance, a focus on boys' underachievement and continuous professional development for teachers and school leaders. In Ireland, the DEIS programme involves not only additional resources but also supports around literacy and numeracy, as well as school planning (Smyth et al., 2015). In addition,

[43] At secondary level, attainment at Key Stages 2 or 3 is also taken into account in the funding formula.

DEIS schools are allocated home–school–community liaison coordinators who work with parents and students to enhance school engagement:

> *We also have the home, school and community liaison teachers in the disadvantaged schools, and their purpose is to work with the families of the children so as that liaison between the school and the family and families do appreciate that contact from the school because it's not the same as contact from the welfare services or other state services that they might have a more negative relationship with. They have a positive relationship with the school and that can help again to develop the culture in the family of coming to school of learning and its increasing expectations of what's possible for the child after school. (Stakeholder, IE)*

Stakeholders in Northern Ireland were often critical of the existing nature of supports in their jurisdiction, with one commentator stating that educational disadvantage receives '*quite a lot of attention but that doesn't translate into action*'. While recognising the spotlight the report by the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement placed on disadvantage, a few commentators were critical, feeling it is '*managing to avoid mentioning social class*' (Stakeholder, NI) and that it '*fudge[s] the big stuff like academic selection*' (Stakeholder, NI).

A key criticism of existing provision centred on the fact that additional funding is not necessarily directed towards specific supports or interventions (see also NICCY, 2017). One stakeholder felt that the key issue is:

> *where money is put into school for educational disadvantage that has to be reported on educational disadvantage. Buying a mini-bus for all the children is great but that actually doesn't help bridge the gap between the haves and the have nots. (Stakeholder, NI)*

Another noted:

> *They are a blunt tool to solve, you know, to try to solve a problem that is not blunt and needs far more detailed solutions. … I think what we think is by throwing money at something through a formula. … When you don't track what the money actually is used for, there's no real assessment evaluation. … [I]n many schools it just goes to balance the books. In many other schools it is used to target, you know, the kids who actually need it. I don't think we're being very successful at all. (Stakeholder, NI)*

In fact, a number of those interviewed from Northern Ireland commented favourably on the DEIS programme in Ireland:

> *One of the programmes I think that we are probably interested in is the DEIS programme, you know, in terms of tackling DEIS, in terms of tackling disadvantages … because it's been such a long-term and sustained intervention and you know a little bit different than the approach that we have taken. (Stakeholder, NI)*

Stakeholders in Ireland were broadly positive about the programme, though some did point to the need for more funding.

> *It also was good that we didn't address the question [disadvantage] by simply throwing money at the problem, but that you need a whole basket of complementary measures, so you have to tackle teacher education, you have to tackle teacher CPD [continuous professional development], you have to put programmes like reading recovery or that in place as well. And you also allowed a certain flexibility for schools to determine what was needed in their own individual circumstances. (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *We would have a concern about the level of funding. We have a concern about the fact that no new schools can join the programme. (Stakeholder, IE)*[44]

However, it is worth noting that certain issues were not raised by stakeholders in Ireland. The lack of routinely-published information on exam performance by social background in Ireland (as is done in Northern Ireland) means that there is no method of monitoring potential changes in inequality over time. Furthermore, the focus of provision has been on the concentration of disadvantage at school level. Research indicates that over half of those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds attend non-DEIS schools (Smyth et al., 2015) but receive no supports by virtue of their disadvantage.

A key difference between the two jurisdictions identified in interviews relates to the way in which religion/community intersect with social background in shaping inequalities. When religion in Ireland was commented on, discussion largely focused on the perceived mismatch between the profile of the population and the denominational profile of schools, particularly at primary level. A recurring theme among stakeholders in Northern Ireland centred on perceived differences between working-class Protestant and Catholic areas in educational expectations for young people.

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[44] The DEIS programme was temporarily closed to new schools but an announcement was made in March 2022 by the Department for Education that the programme was being extended to include new schools.

> *A lot of work has been done particularly in the North here around continuing failure on the part of Protestant boys even those who are coming from very poor economic circumstances, like Catholic boys in the same situation are still outperforming them significantly … pointing to the lack of role models and expectation. (Stakeholder, NI)*

> *They [Catholics] tend to stay within their own communities so the Protestants … see education as a route out of the working-class environment, whereas and I know it's a wide statement, but for some Catholics they see it as a way to come back in and serve their own community and therefore they built up their schools and the standard of education, of academic education, in Catholic schools was higher. (Stakeholder, NI)*

> *There's an element in Protestant culture in Northern Ireland of well, we have a family where we work on the shipyard or we're at this level and, you know, we don't do the transfer test. We don't go to grammar schools now. (Stakeholder, NI)*

In both settings, stakeholders felt that the COVID-19 pandemic and related school closures had contributed to a worsening of inequality in learning outcomes, as well as reduced access to broader supports.

> *DEIS is premised on concentrated disadvantage in the classroom, and … there wasn't a means of supporting that in the home environment. So those children, who would … generally be surrounded by peers who were from more affluent backgrounds within their school, maybe somewhat benefiting from that, whereas that's not the case during the pandemic. So that, I suppose, that was the one piece of inequality that that came through. (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *Missing out on school meant they missed out on so many other things that keep them going and what has become apparent during this pandemic is schools are so much more than places of education, places of learning, that place the children are cared for, where they're fed, where children make their friends, … they're just so important to children's lives. (Stakeholder, NI)*

An analysis of provision for students from a migrant background and/or those for whom English is a second language is beyond the scope of the current study. It is worth noting that the student population is more diverse in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. Since 2012/2013, the allocation of teachers for special needs education and language support has been combined, though schools with a high proportion of students requiring language support do receive additional resources (McGinnity et al., 2018). Migrant students are more likely than other students to

attend DEIS schools (Darmody et al., 2022). In Northern Ireland, schools are paid a Newcomer Pupil Premium to cater for language support needs. Migrant students are underrepresented in grammar compared with secondary schools (ETI, 2020).

3.2.6.2 Special educational needs

Provision for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) was not a central focus of the study. Nonetheless, interesting insights emerged from the stakeholder interviews. Both systems have experienced two sets of challenges: a growth in the number of students with SEN and the consequences for mainstream schools of a shift towards inclusion. In Northern Ireland, it is estimated that 22% of the school population have some form of SEN but a smaller number, 5%, have a statement of SEN (a document outlining needs and supports on the basis of a statutory assessment) (NICCY, 2017). In Ireland, it is estimated that around 25% of 9 year olds have SEN (Banks and McCoy, 2011). The level of need, combined with a shift away from the special school model, was seen as leading to challenges in both systems.

> *The policy agenda, I think both North and South, is towards inclusion that all children should as far as possible go to their local school … But then that creates the challenge. Well, how do you support the school to accommodate that wide range of diversity, abilities, needs in the system? (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *Our numbers have been increasing steadily and markedly over the last number of years, and the increase was something like 45% in the last five or six years or something like that, but it's a very, very significant increase and we're seeing children with more and more complex needs, and a demand that those needs are met. (Stakeholder, NI)*

In both settings too, the emphasis on high-stakes examinations was viewed as having a negative impact on the inclusion of students with SEN:

> *They [students with SEN] have their own insight, their own wisdom and it's important that they feel, that they and their parents feel, included rather than passed over by a system that's only focusing on grades. (Stakeholder, NI)*

Both systems have seen significant increases in investment in SEN provision but challenges were seen to remain around accessing schools in Ireland and the waiting times for assessment for statementing in Northern Ireland.

> *Something is not adding up in the translation and implementation of policy at the local level … So I think the whole piece around really unlocking the local dynamics and understandings around the role of*

> *special schools, the role of mainstream schooling. It is about inclusion. What does that mean in reality? And so on. All the policy principles would, I think, reflect the best research out there. And yet you have parents who are tearing their hair out literally saying I can't get a place for my child in certain areas. (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *This is all managed in our system through statutory requirements, through the statement, with the result that when parents know that they need to get a statement or feel that they need to get a statement or to get the support that they need, so it's become a very rigid type system and a legalistic type system and parents are pushing hard to get children a statement. (Stakeholder, NI)*

This is in contrast to the system in Ireland whereby diagnosis of a particular disability is no longer needed for additional supports to be put in place (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). This change was made in response to advice from the National Council for Special Education in 2013, which found that having to wait for an assessment and formal diagnosis led to inequity in the system (NCSE, 2013). In Northern Ireland, while some additional help can be provided within a mainstream setting, this is done on the basis that all children are different and may require different resources, such as specific books, or information being taught somewhat differently than it is to their peers. For any more complex help, a statement of special education needs from the Education Authority is needed before the school can make any special education provision (Education Authority, 2021). Statements are supposed to be completed within 26 weeks but in 2019/2020, 85% were late and the average time taken was 45 weeks (NIAO, 2020), an issue that has been flagged as of concern by NICCY (2020). One stakeholder in Northern Ireland felt that the system was '*weighed down by all these requests and assessments*', which resulted in people not following through; '*it weeds people out*'. The stakeholder pointed out there were very high levels of SEN in Northern Ireland and one potential cause may be that intervention was not early enough. However, in September 2021, the Minister for Education in Northern Ireland, answering a question in the Northern Ireland Assembly on the delays faced by children in receiving their statement of special education needs, stated:

> *The Education Authority (EA) has taken forward a significant programme of work to reduce waiting times for the completion of statutory assessments. The EA is currently conducting 2,160 statutory assessments for a statement of special educational needs. Ninety-eight per cent of cases (2,117) are currently being processed within the 26-week statutory timeframe. Only 2% (43) have surpassed the statutory timeframe, with the longest 'open case' to date being 35 weeks. (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2021)*

A review by NIAO (2020) has pointed to the lack of systematic evidence on the effectiveness of supports for students with SEN in Northern Ireland.

3.3 FURTHER EDUCATION

3.3.1 Further education systems

The further education and training (FET) sectors in both Northern Ireland and Ireland have seen an increase in focus on policies aimed at enhancing skills development. In Ireland, the country's national training authority, SOLAS, has overall responsibility for FET. Total annual spending by SOLAS on FET provision is approximately €800 million, with much of this funding channelled through Education and Training Boards (ETBs), who have the responsibility of delivering FET.[45] In terms of scale, approximately 200,000 unique learners engage with FET programmes annually.

In 2020, SOLAS published The National Further Education and Training Strategy for the period 2020–2024. Key objectives of the strategy are to put FET at the core of economic development and clarify pathways between FET and both schools and the higher education sector, so as to facilitate more effective lifelong skills development. The strategy aims to expand FET provision through greater participation, particularly among school leavers. At the other end of the spectrum, the strategy also aims to move more closely towards an integrated tertiary education system that combines both FET and higher education provision. The creation of the new Department for Further and Higher Education is seen as a clear step towards achieving a more integrated tertiary system. The Irish FET system has traditionally been centred around three pillars of skill accumulation, providing pathways to further study and enhancing social inclusion; these pillars were re-affirmed in the SOLAS strategy document.

A number of studies have examined FET provision. McIver Consulting (2003) made a range of recommendations for improving FET provision across a range of areas, including recognition of the sector, increased flexibility in course provision, teacher qualifications and course duration. It is not clear that many of the McIver recommendations had been seriously implemented before the publication of a further FET review by the ESRI in 2014. The ESRI report (McGuiness et al, 2014) emphasised the need for improved governance structures that would deliver improved strategic direction at a national level and sufficient flexibility to meet local needs. The ESRI study (2014) also reiterated concerns raised by McIver (2003) around the need for year-round FET provision and the need for improved recognition of the sector.

[45] FET delivery can take place directly by ETBs or by contracting out to other training and education providers.

According to the same 2014 ESRI report, the Post Leaving Certificate programme (PLC) accounts for the majority of full-time FET provision in Ireland and 56% of total FET provision when measured on a full-time equivalent basis.[46] An evaluation of the PLC programme by McGuinness et al. (2019) found strong counterfactual impacts on both the probability of subsequent employment and transitions to higher education. Compared to a control group of similarly qualified individuals who entered the labour market on completion of secondary qualifications, PLC qualifiers were 16% more likely to be in employment at a later point in time and 27% more likely to subsequently transition to higher education. However, despite these positive impacts, McGuinness et al. (2019) found that courses were poorly connected to labour market needs and often seen as a second-best option in the eyes of both school leavers and parents compared to higher education entry. Recent developments have seen the establishment of the National Skills Council and Regional Skills, which are viewed as structures that will help ensure an increased match between further education provision with labour market needs. The poor image problem of FET provision, compared to higher education, was a common theme of all three studies (McIver Consulting, 2003; ESRI, 2014; McGuinness et al., 2019). In order to address these issues, agreement has been reached on integrating more aspects of FET course provision into the Central Applications Office (CAO) application process for access to further/higher study.

With respect to further education in Northern Ireland, there is relatively little academic work published on the issue; however, a number of strategy and policy reports do provide some important insights. In 2016, the Department for the Economy published an econometric analysis of further education data focusing on student retention and course completion. This report found that the probability of student success varied with college and course type; success rates were also higher if students studied full time and came from areas that were rural or less deprived. A study by McIntosh and Morris (2016), examining the returns to vocational qualifications within a UK framework, found significant returns to vocational qualifications, which tended to be higher in Northern Ireland when compared to Scotland and Wales, but lower than in England. McIntosh and Morris (2016) report that, compared to a no qualifications reference category, individuals in Northern Ireland with a Business and Technology Training Council (BTEC) Higher National Diploma/Certificate enjoy a 55% wage premium, which compares to 58% in Wales and 49% in Scotland. A BTEC national qualification in Northern Ireland was found to earn a wage premium of 41%, compared to premiums of 34% in Scotland and Wales. Consistent with the evidence for Ireland, a review of education for 14-19 year olds in Northern Ireland by Pivotal (2021) reported that further education was perceived as a 'second-class option' by both parents and school leavers. Pivotal (2021) reported that a potential driver of the perceived lower status of further education was a preoccupation among parents with the A-level awards system and

[46] Based on 2011 data published in ESRI (2014).

a belief that any alternative pathway to A-levels was necessarily inferior. The research reported a need for greater outcome data for apprenticeship training and greater links between further and higher education. An OECD report on skill development in Northern Ireland (2019) noted that the skills landscape has been changing substantially over recent years, with the merging of local colleges and greater levels of employer involvement through initiatives such as the Strategic Advisory Forum.[47]

The OECD (2020b) argues that improvements in employer engagement have helped contribute to significant increases in apprenticeship and traineeship participation levels in Northern Ireland, which have increased by 25% between 2014 and 2019. The OECD (2020b) report also indicated that some local further education colleges have developed strategies to achieve a closer alignment between their provision and employer demand.[48] In 2020, the OECD published a skills strategy for Northern Ireland and made a number of recommendations across a range of policy areas, including reducing skill imbalances, creating a culture of lifelong learning and transforming workplaces to make better use of skills. The OECD (2020b) report also made some specific recommendations on strengthening skills governance systems, including: (i) binding commitments to a cross-departmental skills strategy for Northern Ireland; (ii) increased co-ordination of skills policy through the establishment of a centralised oversight body populated by representatives of all relevant departments and agencies; and (iii) the establishment of a central skill needs advisory body, made up from representatives from employer bodies, to advise government on skills policy.

A number of key recent policy documents have been published by the Department for the Economy that have implications for further education delivery in the region. In 2021, the Department for the Economy published *A 10x Economy*, which was described as an economic vision for a decade of innovation. While the report identifies skills as having a central role in the strategic vision and reiterates many of the recommendations made in the OECD (2020b) report, there were no specific spending plans outlined. The document commits to a renewed focus on investing in skills. Subsequent to this report, the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland published a skills strategy for Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Skills Strategy (2021) again reflects many of the themes raised within the OECD (2020b) study but, as was the case with the economic strategy, the document outlines areas where change is required while in the main failing to specify policy reforms, spending commitments or targets. The skills strategy document discusses the role of skills across various aspects of economy and society, including addressing skill imbalances, lifelong learning, digital skills and policy cohesion. Thirty-four

[47] This body was established in 2014 to advise Government on all forms of youth training and apprenticeship. The forum consists of representatives of employers, trade unions, government, colleges and universities.

[48] The OECD report cites Belfast Metropolitan College's employer outreach initiative as an example of this.

commitments are specified in Annex A of the skills strategy, the most relevant of these in terms of further education provision are as follows.

- The Department for the Economy will review how it collects data on further education leavers in order to improve the evidence base around the outcomes of further education qualifiers.
- The FET sector will be sufficiently resourced so that it can effectively meet the dual commitments of providing entry level pathways to education and delivering the technical/professional skills necessary to support economic/societal prosperity.
- A review of level 4 and level 5 further education and higher education will be carried out.
- A new lifelong learning project and action plan will be developed.
- Work will be conducted with the FET sector to develop remote/blended/modular approaches to learning.
- The Northern Ireland Skills Council (NSC) will be established.
- Under the auspices of the NSC, there will be a review and rationalisation of the existing skills governance infrastructure.
- A new ringfenced fund will be established to support the skills development of the working-aged population.

3.3.2 Main changes in policy and ongoing challenges

There was a clear sense from the stakeholder interviews that further education provision in Ireland is seen as being further advanced, in terms of how its role is established within the overall policy framework, than is currently the case for Northern Ireland. Our desk-based research has indicated that further education provision in Ireland has already been subjected to a series of strategic reviews; however, in Northern Ireland it appears that this process is at a more developmental stage. While it is perceived that there has been good progress in clarifying pathways between further education and higher education in Ireland, there are still a lot of outstanding issues:

> *There have been many changes within the FET sector over many years and there have been a lot of improvements in terms of streamlining provision within the system and providing more clear-cut pathways to HE. (Stakeholder, IE)*

There was much less evidence of recent policy changes in Northern Ireland fundamentally altering the nature of provision. There, policy formulation appears to be more focused on clarifying the role of further education within the region's overall strategic mission. However, it was also expressed that the absence remains of a stand-alone strategy or policy approach to further education provision in Northern Ireland:

> *There is nothing at the moment that one could point to, I think, that is an articulation of a departmental policy position on the role of the FE [further education] sector … In the absence of that what we now need to do is clearly find our role within contributing to the economic vision that has been set out by the department and, specifically, delivering the skills strategy. (Stakeholder, NI)*

Reflecting the above, current challenges for policy differ substantively across both regions. In Ireland, the focus is on improving and clarifying pathways across different areas of provision; within Northern Ireland there remains a need for a stand-alone policy approach to further education provision and the development of a strategic vision for the sector. Nevertheless, the perceived inferior status of further education provision in the eyes of parents and students is an ongoing problem facing further education providers in both jurisdictions. A key aspect of the lower status of further education is seen to be driven by a lack of understanding of the FET sector by key actors in the educational system and, as reflected in the Northern Ireland policy documents, the development of metrics that effectively demonstrate the labour market value of further education qualifications.

> *Our main problem is a lack of knowledge about what is available, you know, so there is no doubt we still have a mountain to climb in terms of getting those messages across, and I think it's actually the young people who need to convince their parents. (Stakeholder, NI)*

> *The main policy issue is still trying to raise the awareness of the viability and value of VET [vocational education and training] options compared to third-level routes. Trying to get VET and apprenticeship options into the CAO is one of the main routes of trying to weaken the cultural embeddedness of higher education. (Stakeholder, IE)*

Within both systems, there is a perceived need for greater increased clarity on the pathways available for VET students. This will require improved co-ordination both within the FET sector and between educational sectors. The lack of well-defined pathways for vocational students was seen as a major impediment to encouraging increased student participation in both jurisdictions.

> *There still remains a need for a more integrated system with VET with apprenticeships playing a more central role. There is a need for a more sensible system where people choose routes according to their needs and a shift away from the dominance of HE. This requires more simplified pathways within VET and more recognisable pathways to HE. (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *There has been a lot of progress in terms of thinking about how the various components of the educational system connect. Three or four*

> *years ago, you couldn't even talk about the integration as individual components of the system, such as HE, weren't particularly engaged. In spite of recent improvements in policy, the VET to HE transitions needs process still improved. VET–HE transitions are currently too dependent on relationships between IoTs and individual colleges. (Stakeholder, IE)*

Within Northern Ireland, the problem of developing well-defined pathways is more complicated as recent years have seen an increased level of vocational provision in the school and higher education sectors while, at the same time, further education colleges offer A-level courses, which are more traditionally delivered in a school setting. The spread of provision across different institutional settings makes the system more difficult to navigate and impedes the development of well-defined pathways. Area-learning communities, where schools collaborate at local level to provide a broad and balanced curriculum to students, have helped facilitate a more co-operative and joined-up approach to provision across different components of the educational system.

> *Schools are doing more in the vocational space and that's been building up, one might say encroachment into the territory of what have been traditionally FE colleges. By the way, schools might also say [to FE colleges], well, why are you doing A levels now? (Stakeholder, NI)*

> *We're trying to make sure that [the] two systems work well together and that schools and further education colleges, in particular, work and collaborate together. And there is evidence of good collaboration [in] some of the area learning communities … and that can help to ensure that children are given the better provision. (Stakeholder, NI)*

Within the Northern Ireland system, a number of concerns were raised around the issue of governance. There was a perceived limit to the degree to which colleges could act autonomously in the area of course provision; there was also a high level of competition between colleges. Finally, within Northern Ireland, there was a sense that the colleges were often expected to act on policy initiatives without being provided with sufficient resources or lead times to allow them to do so effectively:

> *There needs to be serious intent on making the system join up. While the six FE colleges are required to collaborate on skills issues, none the less we compete. It's a challenging dynamic. The competitive dynamic between institutions mitigates against developing the most appropriate pathways for learners. (Stakeholder, NI)*

At the stakeholder consultation event, there was a fair degree of commonality in terms of the reported priorities facing the FET sector in both jurisdictions and, specifically, ongoing uncertainties around the identity of FET and the sector's positioning within the wider education and training system and within wider society. The need for improved and well-defined pathways for students within FET, as well as between schools and FET and between FET and higher education, was highlighted. The discussants felt that there was an urgent need for young people to be able to access more meaningful pathways within the post-compulsory education and training system that lead to good outcomes in terms of employment and/or further study. Central to the issues of pathways and the perceived secondary position of FET is the role of advice and guidance systems; this was seen as a central platform by which policy could seek to reform the image of FET and its perceived Cinderella status within the educational and training system. The dominance of higher education in both jurisdictions was discussed and it was felt that there was a need to 'strike the right balance' between participation rates in higher education and FET within both education systems. There is a perceived need to unpack the extent to which the prominence of higher education as an education pathway is healthy or desirable from a societal perspective.

> *If you think about someone who wants to be a nurse at 16, what exposure are they getting in upper secondary general education and how is that followed on to FE and higher education and what are the guaranteed pathways that would allow someone to achieve that? (Consultation attendee)*

> *Not only is FE connected to the other parts of the education and training system, FE is also connected to the wider skills eco-system that's out there, so that as policymakers we can zoom out and look at the role of FET in terms of the economic and social renewal that we aspire to. (Consultation attendee)*

The discussants recognised substantial gaps in vocational/intermediate level skills that are extremely important for sustainable economic performance and felt that the FET sector is central to addressing such gaps. A need was expressed for policymakers to take a systems-wide view when determining skills provision and it was noted that the separation of different parts of the educational system into distinct government departments can act as a barrier to this. Responsibility for FET rests with the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland, whereas in Ireland it is located with the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Factors that might explain variations in FET provision across the two jurisdictions include differences in funding models and the extent to which this factor incentivises FET providers. It was also thought that the market, competition and choice are likely to influence FET provision in different ways across both jurisdictions.

The flexibility and responsiveness of FET was recognised as a principal advantage in both regions, particularly in Ireland. Discussants shared the view that it would be beneficial for policy to focus on encouraging similar levels of responsiveness in other parts of the education and training system. The lack of available good-quality data and systematic analysis of sufficient quality to inform policy was seen as a further challenge, again for both systems. Finally, with respect to existing levels of North–South co-operation and collaboration, it was recognised that engagement can take place at many different levels, from government to practitioner. Discussants felt that it was more useful to think about FET collaboration in a wider macroeconomic context in areas such as innovation, research and all-Ireland approaches to skills renewal. Agency-to-agency co-operation does occur and collaborations between the Quality and Qualifications Institute (QQI) and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) were cited as one example of North–South co-operation; institutional-level collaborations also exist, particularly among colleges located in the border regions. At the individual level, SCoTENS was cited as a model for existing teacher-level collaborations; however, it was unclear if the SCoTENS network includes FET practitioners. In summary, discussants felt that there were multiple opportunities for North–South engagement at multiple levels and it was agreed that such increased collaboration would be a positive development.

3.4 HIGHER EDUCATION

3.4.1 Higher education systems

High levels of third-level educational attainment are universally seen as a key determinant of economic growth. Higher education attainment is also known to raise individual-level productivity, which translates to the higher wage premiums estimated for third-level graduates in this report. Rates of participation in higher education have increased dramatically in both Northern Ireland and Ireland over recent decades, which has resulted in significant changes in higher education funding mechanisms, with student contributions increasing substantially in both jurisdictions. Within Northern Ireland, the most recent relevant policy document discussing higher education is the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland (2021). According to this strategy, there were 16,000 qualifications awarded in 2019/2020 by Northern Ireland's higher education institution and, of these, 57% were first degrees, 35% postgraduate awards and 8% other qualifications. There appears to be a limited number of recommendations, or targets, within the skills strategy specific to the higher education sector. Its recommendations relevant to the sector include: (a) a commitment to increase the number of graduates qualifying in STEM-demand subjects by 2030; and (b) significant increases in the proportions of people obtaining Level 3, 4 and 5 qualifications. The strategy points to some level of mismatch between the outputs of the Northern Ireland education system and labour market demand, with shortages in some key STEM areas existing in parallel

with many graduates employed in jobs where a degree is not a requirement (typically termed over-education). The strategy also affirms the commitment to an independent review of education, to ensure that the Northern Ireland education system is sustainable and economically relevant. This issue of economic sustainability is particularly pertinent to the higher education sector, given that funding per student in Northern Ireland is estimated to be around £2,000 lower compared to levels in English universities.[49] This funding gap began to emerge after the decision in 2012 to permit English universities to increase tuition fees, which have since risen to £9,250. The Northern Ireland Executive took a decision to retain a lower cap fee in Northern Ireland higher education institutions, which currently stands at £4,250. The funding gap that exists relative to both English and Scottish institutions has also been driven by a substantial squeeze in general public funding arising from policies pursued by the UK government since 2010, impacting the Northern Ireland block grant.

Another aspect of the Northern Ireland higher education system that has attracted a significant amount of debate over recent decades is a perceived Northern Ireland 'brain drain'. Each year, a substantial proportion of young people leave Northern Ireland to attend English and Scottish higher education institutions and upon graduation do not return. A recent study by Pivotal (2021) reported that, in 2018/2019, over 17,000 students were studying outside Northern Ireland compared to 3,470 from elsewhere that came to study in Northern Ireland. While the Pivotal report recognised that there are multiple factors that influence a student's decision to study elsewhere, a constrained supply of university places is a major contributory factor; for instance, for every 100 applicants to Northern Ireland higher education institutions in any one year there are around 60 available places (Pivotal, 2021). In terms of rates of return, just over one-third of Northern Ireland students graduating from institutions in Great Britain were working in Northern Ireland six months following graduation (Pivotal, 2021). A second 2021 report by Pivotal reported that poor community relations and political instability were major factors influencing young people's decisions to study outside of Northern Ireland. McGuinness and Bergin (2020) analysed educational attainment rates in Northern Ireland and compared these with both Great Britain and Ireland and found that in 2014 34% of persons aged 24-30 years in Northern Ireland held third-level qualifications; compared to Great Britain regions, only Wales and the Northeast had lower higher education attainment rates.

Data on the higher education system in Ireland are provided by, among others, the Higher Education Authority (HEA). In 2018/2019, there were 43,875 new entrants to HEA-funded institutions and 73,333 persons graduated in that period. Among

49 Time Higher Education (2020), 'Northern Ireland universities need more than fees', *Soundbites*, https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/northern-irish-universities-need-more-fees-soundbites.

new entrants, the most popular disciplines were arts and humanities (21%), business, administration and law (19%) and health and welfare (15%). In terms of higher education policy, the most radical change in the landscape over recent years has been the creation of technological universities, as set out in the Technological Universities Act 2018. As of 2020, there was one designated technological university (Technological University Dublin), one other consortia was pending with three other consortiums engaged in the process of becoming technological universities. The technological university policy has its roots in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 published in 2011. The 2011 strategy report called for the amalgamation of existing institutes of technology into technological universities of appropriate scale and capacity with the emerging institutions. The strategy document (2011) defines a technological university as 'a higher education institution that operates at the highest academic level in an environment that is specifically focused on technology and its application'. The strategy has a regional balancing dimension; furthermore, the development of a technological university sector is seen as a key element in ensuring Ireland's continued success at attracting high value-added foreign direct investment.

A number of academic studies focusing on the higher education sector in Ireland are worth noting. Flannery and O'Donoghue (2009) examined the determinants of higher education participation and found that higher education participation in Ireland tends to be higher when labour markets are weaker and foregone earnings lower. Walsh et al. (2015) found that overall geographical accessibility to universities in Ireland was poor relative to Northern Ireland; furthermore, geographical inequalities were a factor in determining the field of study pursued by students in Ireland. With respect to the role of social class, McCoy and Smyth (2011) found that the initial expansion of education in higher education that took place between 1980 and 2006 resulted in a widening of the participation gap between the children of higher professional occupations and those from other groups; the authors found that the gap declined later in the period largely due to near saturation levels among the professional groupings. McCoy and Smyth (2011) also found that educational expansion in Ireland resulted in a substantial shift in gender composition, with young women accounting for the majority of new entrants. Finally, McGuinness et al. (2019) demonstrate, using two separate datasets, that 33% of Irish employees are overeducated (that is, have a higher level of education than is required by their jobs), the highest rate among all European countries included in the study. The findings of McGuinness et. al (2019) raise questions regarding the extent to which higher education provision in Ireland appropriately reflects labour market requirements.

3.4.2 Main changes in policy and ongoing challenges

In Ireland, the establishment of technological universities was seen by stakeholders interviewed as a major policy development that will fundamentally alter the

landscape of higher education provision. It was felt that these new institutions will deepen capacity at a regional level and create international linkages within the regions in areas of technological innovation. There is also an inclusion agenda that the technological universities will help deliver in terms of widening access geographically and providing more educational options and pathways for students at a local level:

> *An objective of the technological universities is to deepen capacity at a regional level and to also have an international reach, from a regional perspective, out into the innovative technological research space. (Stakeholder, IE)*

In both Northern Ireland and Ireland, an important and ongoing issue is the development of clear educational pathways both into and through higher education, so that students can clearly map progression routes through the educational system. The fact that individuals have to leave Northern Ireland for third-level study due to a lack of consistency in course provision between further education and higher education was seen as a clear loss to society and economy:

> *Currently there are moves to align all HE and FE provision at Level 4 and 5 (Level 4 would be certificates and foundation degrees). Lots of the FE Level 4 and 5s don't align well with a HE degree. The university is involved in a process that is attempting to build a transitions system a system so that students don't have to leave Northern Ireland to study for a degree. (Stakeholder, NI)*

The need to keep course content relevant to labour market needs was another concern raised by the stakeholders. There was a sense that, particularly within the secondary system, there was too much focus on meeting exam requirements, with far too little focus on skills development. Within Ireland it was felt the higher education system was less open to a more labour market focused educational approach compared to further education. Within Northern Ireland, it was felt that skills development within the educational system performs well until students reach the age of 14, after which the curriculum focus becomes heavily centred on formal examinations; however, by the time students reach university it was felt that their skills development was relatively poor.

> *Digital skills, future world of work, construction skills, green skills are a real focus. To orientate the further education system, which is open to it and the higher education system, which is less open to it, to that kind of agenda. (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *I would say the restricting point on that (preparation for the world of work) is … actually the curriculum to get you to 16 and the curriculum*

> *to get you to 17 or 18, because it is focused on the examination system. Ironically, a student at 14 is actually pretty well prepared skills wise. There is a lot of skills training that goes into kids up to about 14, which I think is Key Stage 3. By the time they get the Key Stage 4, they are now straight into GCSE subjects and they don't have an awful lot of skills training … I do think they get a little bit more institutionalised that way, and it's because … you're judged on how you perform in GCSEs, BTECs, A levels. (Stakeholder, NI)*

The issue of students leaving Northern Ireland for higher education study was again raised. It was felt that the scale of higher education provision in the region was simply way below what was being demanded and that student emigration would be substantially lowered if educational supply was substantially scaled up.

> *I think … about 9 to 10,000 students enter into Ulster and Queens, about 4,000 leave to go to England, Scotland and Wales. Of those 4,000, probably less than 1,000 will return back to Northern Ireland, so we constantly export. Only about of 60% of applicants there are places for in Northern Ireland. If you go to England, they have more places than they have people. (Stakeholder, NI)*

During some interviews, reference was made to imbalances in teacher training supply, with a perceived surplus of qualified teachers in Northern Ireland and a perceived supply shortage in Ireland. However, more in-depth discussion revealed the situation to be more nuanced than this. While it may be the case that not all Northern Ireland teaching graduates go straight into permanent fulltime posts, it is not the case that many of the graduates are unemployed:

> *There is a shortage of teaching jobs in England and they are trying to recruit from our (NI) college very actively. There is a fairly critical situation (in NI) at the moment with schools not able to get substitute cover. There isn't a surplus of teachers out there now are sitting idle looking for a job. They are in big demand. (Stakeholder, NI)*

According to the GTCNI, out of 26,732 teachers registered in Northern Ireland, 20,208 (76%) were employed on either a permanent or temporary (one term or more) contract. In terms of North–South teacher mobility, it was also stated that it is difficult for Northern Ireland qualified teachers to work in Ireland due to differences in the qualifications required for teaching positions.

3.5 CO-OPERATION ACROSS THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

This section examines education stakeholder views on North–South contact and co-operation. Here we outline a number of key issues that were highlighted during the interviews regarding the extent of awareness of policies in the other

jurisdiction, the degree of contact and co-operation between the two jurisdictions, and barriers to and perceived benefits from greater co-operation.

3.5.1 Awareness of stakeholders of policies in the other jurisdiction

Many stakeholders pointed to a low level of cross-jurisdiction policy awareness.

> *I would say the degree of mutual understanding and knowledge of each other's systems and policies … is pretty low, certainly on the ground. (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *And there's so many differences but even asking what those were? I would say most people up here [NI] wouldn't have a clue and vice versa. (Stakeholder, NI)*

However, differing views arose regarding specific aspects of the education systems. Several stakeholders felt there was a fair degree of awareness at an official and civil service level, with some stakeholders mentioning this was achieved through regular senior management team meetings and interactions at official-to-official level in terms of sharing policies, providing updates on initiatives and commenting on new policies:

> *I think there's a very strong consciousness. There's a very strong awareness of various policies by virtue of the fact that we share them. And we talk to them and we engage with each other on it. (Stakeholder, IE)*

Differences in the curriculum and structures of the education systems were mentioned by some stakeholders as reasons for the lower level of policy awareness, with Great Britain being the more usual frame of reference for Northern Ireland:

> *The Republic is more outward facing but a very large proportion of the establishment in the North is focused on ... the big island next door and doesn't see a wider world or a bigger picture. (Stakeholder, NI)*

Perhaps not surprisingly, there was a view among stakeholders that policy awareness at the school level is higher in the border regions and lower elsewhere.

> *There are some schools that have been very good at establishing school-to-school cross-border linkages. And I think they are different. They have a much greater awareness, inevitably so of what's going on the other side of the border, but it depends on the school being involved in the, you know, either the Erasmus project or a North South Peace 2 project. (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *If you're running a school away a long way from the border, your main concern … is about dealing with the day-to-day. You're probably less interested in international education policy developments in another jurisdiction. (Stakeholder, IE)*

3.5.2 North–South contact and co-operation

Many stakeholders highlighted a few examples of good practice in North–South co-operation. Across the stakeholder interviews, common examples included the areas of teacher education through SCoTENs (Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South), strong links between the Inspectorates, the Middletown Centre for Autism, which is a North–South initiative, and the successive EU PEACE programmes and associated funding. It should be noted that stakeholders naturally brought up programmes they knew of and which were salient to their own work. If, for example, school principals had been interviewed, the focus may have been more on shared education initiatives such as those under the successive PEACE programmes.

In the area of inspections, several stakeholders commented on there being extensive North–South contact and collaboration. In addition to management teams and officials meeting on a regular basis, a memorandum of understanding allows for the exchange of inspectors for observation purposes. Inspectors also attend elements of professional training courses in the other jurisdiction, and inspect provision there, by arrangement:

> *One of the things that is useful from our perspective is that the legislation in the North enables us to go into schools to do what's called inspection with authority. So it's slightly more problematic for inspectors from the ETI to come down here. They have to come down by invitation of the school. Whereas we could, we can go in with them and have this inspection with authority status … There's all sorts of inspector exchanges, we helped them a lot on the Irish language front. (Stakeholder, IE)*

Higher education appeared to involve more co-operation than other sectors, albeit in a somewhat ad hoc nature. There was some co-operation in certain areas of provision; for instance, plans are in progress to jointly deliver MSc programmes between different universities across the two jurisdictions and it was seen that there is significant scope to extend such co-operation into undergraduate provision:

> *If we really got this right, we could have a student … who could study one set of courses within the South and finish those up in the North and vice versa. Because all the courses are the same, chemistry 101 is chemistry 101 … We are trying to bring it in initially at Level 7, which*

> *is MSc, to try to sell Ireland as an education centre, North and South, providing high quality education. (Stakeholder, NI)*

There also was the perception that geographic proximity played a role:

> *There are more Chinese students in Athlone Institute of Technology than there are students from Northern Ireland in Dundalk Institute of Technology. Other than for the Northwest, where there is really significant engagement, co-operation is very segmented. … My sense is that the Northern Ireland system hasn't really taken advantage of devolution and, in fact, has ended up aligning itself to England more closely than Wales or Scotland. (Stakeholder, IE)*

On co-operation in the area of teacher education, one stakeholder noted:

> *SCoTENs had a model of bringing together in a non-threatening way all the practitioners in a particular area, in education, the teachers, the College of Education, the education administrators, the department, the teaching councils, the education trade unions to do something on an all-Ireland basis. It's a real model and yet it's almost totally unknown outside teacher education. (Stakeholder, NI)*

However, many stakeholders highlighted that these links are ad hoc in nature and are often based on individual relationships or specific projects and initiatives.

> *There are no strategic directives obliging people, or bodies, to co-operate ... there would be some co-operation but it is ad hoc. People on both sides of the border tend to work together because they know each other, but it's not strategic. (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *The Northwest Strategic Growth Partnership where you have local authorities on either side of the border that are looking at how can we look after the people in our region better. They don't look at the border, they look at a region and there are other possibilities that models like that could be exploring along the border and it's all done within a framework of – it doesn't mean that, you know, you've given up your nationality, you've given up your citizenship, you've given up anything. It just means that you're looking at this chunk that's on this island and [asking] how can I do something better? (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *Again it probably remains within a project … and when the project dies, I don't know. (Stakeholder, NI)*

Several stakeholders felt there was less North–South co-operation now than in the past, with one stakeholder commenting that learning from previous successful co-

operation projects – often supported under EU programmes – had been '*largely lost*'. A stakeholder in the North said:

> *My impression is that the really exciting period in cross-border educational co-operation was the first ten years of the century when there was a lot of EU funding for North–South educational co-operation projects … my impression is since 2013, it's much, much less … I think … educational co-operation is at a very low level. It hasn't gone back quite to the to the pre-1998 levels, but it's gone back pretty close. (Stakeholder, NI)*

> *One example between 2001 and 2010, there were four reports, commissioned by the two departments of education into North–South education cooperation. They were great at doing reports and the reports usually came up with a proposal that there should be greater coordination to avoid duplication and overlap and some sort of strategic structure to make sure that it moves, that they move, forward in a coherent way. And none of those recommendations were taken up, and now we're not talking about duplication or overlap because there aren't that many projects, so we've gone from a profusion of activity that needed to be coordinated to a trickle of activity that, well, doesn't need to be coordinated because there's so little of it. (Stakeholder, NI)*

Some stakeholders felt that Brexit had impacted the education landscape; one, for example, felt much of the recent policy focus was around dealing with Brexit and ensuring mobility of students at all education levels is supported and that fees and grants for third-level students would be portable:

> *In the context of Brexit, one of the key pieces of work has been around the Common Travel Area and ensuring that we could embed the principles of how it should work, not just on a North–South, but obviously on [an] East–West basis as well … There were pieces of work to do, not just around what the Common Travel Area should look like, but also the legislation to support mobility and to ensure that our students would not be disadvantaged by Brexit. Also, to ensure UK students coming to Ireland would not be disadvantaged either. (Stakeholder, IE)*

3.5.3 Benefits and barriers to greater North–South co-operation

A common theme across the interviews is that, while many were in favour of more contact and co-operation, barriers, especially in terms of time and resources, made it difficult to pursue this in a meaningful, consistent manner. It was felt from a

range of stakeholders that time was a huge issue, with North–South co-operation much less pressing than many of the issues currently facing schools.

> *Look, everyone is going to argue in favour of more co-operation. The problem is time. (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *More cross-border co-operation would be incredibly important but what's urgent is the submission you've to submit tomorrow or the meeting you have to go to this afternoon or the child who's upset in front of you at this moment, and so it is a case in many a lot of the time that the urgent does crowd out the important. (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *And actually, that's one thing I'd like to see more of. It's more North–South co-operation in education. I think it could happen, but you need to. Again, it's like a lot of things. A good idea doesn't happen unless you make space for it. (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *They [schools] are busy and they're doing what they do and therefore the policy in another jurisdiction doesn't engage them as much. (Stakeholder, NI)*

It was also felt very strongly by key informants that the systems are not set up with co-operation between the jurisdictions in mind.

> *I think we could learn a lot from each other … but the systems need to support that. It just doesn't happen. (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *When the Stormont Assembly was on hiatus, half the funding of SCoTENS disappeared overnight. And it had three years of desperately trying to pay the bills. So that's the sort of thing that that becomes a problem for North–South co-operation. (Stakeholder, IE)*

Many stakeholders felt that enhanced co-operation would bring broad benefits, while also facilitate them to reflect further on their own sector or system.

> *Sometimes you need help from the outside to see [that] it doesn't always have to be like this. (Stakeholder, NI)*

> *Any collaboration with other jurisdictions has been beneficial. Whether it is simply … just to hear what happened, because you may view things slightly differently yourself, either in a more positive or more negative way. (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *I think that we need to get out of our silo-ised approaches… I think as well that we have a lot of students post-18 travelling North and South and things like that. And you know, we need to be I think working*

> *together and learning from each other. Like, that, that would be a real vehicle and it would be something that would be an absolute asset. And I think schools would value that. I don't think it would be anathema to them. I think we would be keen. (Stakeholder, NI)*

There was also a perceived scope for co-operation on more specific and substantive issues, including teacher education and issues around capacity and planning. In particular, there have been attempts to align teacher education and, more importantly, teaching registration so that teachers are able to teach across the island.

> *There must be a potential for collaboration in teacher education … both for fulfilling the … very large teacher demand down here and the excess of teacher capacity up there. (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *There's issues around capacity. There's issues around, you know, why have we got a university campus in Derry and then Letterkenny IT literally about ten miles away? … Are there more efficient ways that we can deliver resources and help each other out? (Stakeholder, IE)*

> *Geographically and demographically we are both facing that challenge of how … [to] administer effectively a very large number of very small schools. (Stakeholder, IE)*

At the consultation event, most of the feedback focused on the issue of co-operation and a number of broad issues were identified in this respect. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, it was identified that simply mandating co-operation is unlikely to be successful as a strategy**:**

> *You cannot simply mandate co-operation top down, you cannot declare from the top that it should happen then expect, therefore, that it will happen. But at the same time having a framework to support and enable co-operation does help. (Consultation attendee)*

It was thought that much more emphasis should be placed on establishing the structures and mechanisms that facilitate North–South co-operation.

Some successful examples of North–South co-operation were cited. For instance, under SCoTENS, fairly modest investment has generated some strong links in teacher education over a sustained period of time. It was noted that SCoTENS has operated with a small research fund and access to a secretariat, indicating that relatively simple and inexpensive structures have the potential to generate significant benefits in terms of co-operation. Universities Ireland provides another example of co-operation in the higher education space, as does a recent Higher Education Authority (HEA) led initiative on North–South funding, which has

generated a high degree of interest and attracted hundreds of applications involving partners on both sides of the island. Going forward, the PEACE PLUS programmes, funded by the EU, UK government, Irish government and Northern Ireland Executive, and co-designed by the two administrations on the island, were also identified as having particular potential in terms of enhancing North–South co-operation in education, including in vocational education.

The discussants felt that such successful examples of past and existing co-operation provide vital insights into the type of structures that are helpful to promoting effective North–South co-operation. It was also noted that a number of issues facing both education systems could form the basis for future co-operation: outward migration and 'brain drain' represents a policy concern in both parts of the island, while both jurisdictions also face similar issues and difficulties in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is also the common interest in attracting international students.

Some stakeholders felt there was room for co-operation within specific sectors:

> *Definitely great potential in more strategic collaboration, particularly in VET. Also in areas such as literacy provision and community education. (Stakeholder, IE)*

In terms of higher education, it was felt that there were opportunities for collaboration there, as '*the ability to have the top class teaching and learning that you need for the high-end provision can't be everywhere'* (Stakeholder, NI).

There are important lessons to be learnt from areas where North–South co-operation exists in the absence of formal institutional structures. One example, which could provide important insights, relates to border areas and the instances where children cross the border for educational purposes. There are also insights to be gained from understanding where co-operation levels are less than might be expected; for instance, with respect to grant applications and Erasmus programme activity, it was identified that it has been more common for institutions in Ireland to collaborate with GB, rather than Northern Ireland, counterparts:

> *There is lots of Erasmus activity between Southern institutions and England but not very much North–South and we need to try and understand what is happening in those situations. (Consultation attendee).*

Both operational and technical challenges are seen as hampering efforts to enhance North–South co-operation. For instance, there is widescale agreement on the potential merits of an all-island approach to apprenticeships; however, apprenticeship systems differ in their delivery and approach across the two

jurisdictions and it would be necessary to address such technical variations before a more co-operative approach could be considered. There is also likely to be some political resistance to all-island delivery approaches or any substantial scaling up of co-operation:

> *Politics is an issue. In the North our slightly unusual system of government gives a lot of power to individual ministers and that can act as a constraint. Some ministers are more enthusiastic about North–South co-operation than others. So one of the issues there is about trying to identify common interest goals that provide incentives for all politicians to support. (Consultation attendee)*

3.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter has drawn on stakeholder interviews and a consultation event with policy stakeholders to outline commonalities and differences between the education systems in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The two systems face many of the same challenges at primary and secondary levels, especially around the shift from a more child-centred curriculum at primary level to the second-level focus on preparation for high-stakes exams. However, the existence of academic selection in Northern Ireland was seen as a key driver of difference between the two systems. Social inequalities, while an issue in both jurisdictions, appeared to be a more pressing issue in Northern Ireland than in Ireland. Furthermore, although some noted its faults, stakeholders in both jurisdictions spoke highly of the DEIS programme (in Ireland), which provides additional resources and supports to schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged populations.

Differences in further education were identified across the two systems, particularly in terms of its place in the overall educational landscape, but both jurisdictions face similar challenges around encouraging young people to see further education as a viable alternative to higher education. Higher education institutions in both jurisdictions were found to face similar challenges around funding.

Stakeholders pointed to some examples of successful co-operation across the island of Ireland, but indicated that many such initiatives were ad hoc or limited in longevity to a specific programme funding. Geographic proximity also emerged as an important factor in co-operation across the island. However, most stakeholders pointed to the value of further such co-operation, particularly on substantive policy issues and/or at specific sectoral levels.

CHAPTER 4
Conclusions and policy recommendations

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This study draws on international and national survey data, existing literature and in-depth interviews with policy stakeholders to document commonalities and differences between the educational systems of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Remarkably, **this is the first systematic comparison of the two systems across the span of primary to higher education.** In contrast to studies which emphasise the potential for policy borrowing, that is, transplanting an example of good practice from one system to another, this **study explores the potential for policy learning, looking at the ways in which educational systems reflect their specific historical and societal factors but can still provide insights into potential policy directions and unintended consequences of reform** (Raffe and Semple, 2011). It is worth noting that neither educational system is static, with reviews of primary and upper secondary curriculum and assessment underway in Ireland and an independent review of the whole educational system initiated in Northern Ireland.

4.2 SKILLS AND QUALIFICATIONS

Both Ireland and Northern Ireland have tended to fare well in international assessments of literacy and numeracy, at primary and secondary level. However, marked differences are found in the qualifications attained in the two systems. Northern Ireland has a much higher proportion of people leaving school without an upper secondary qualification than Ireland. What is most concerning is that while rates of early school leaving have improved considerably in Ireland in the last 15 years, there has been little such change in Northern Ireland. In recent years, rates of early school leaving in Northern Ireland have been over twice that seen in Ireland. Furthermore, much fewer attain post-secondary non-tertiary qualifications there than in Ireland, resulting in a very different educational profile among all adults and younger adults across the two jurisdictions.

Patterns and manifestations of educational inequality differ between the two systems. Northern Ireland shows greater intergenerational inequality than Ireland in levels of early school leaving. In both systems, students from more disadvantaged backgrounds (as proxied by receipt of free school meals or an exam-fee waiver) achieve lower grades at lower and upper secondary levels. This inequality in exam grades is more evident in Ireland, a pattern that is consistent with the effectively maintained inequality hypothesis (Lucas, 2001), whereby as class inequality in the proportion staying on in school reduces, differences become more evident in the grades received or type of subject studied. In Northern Ireland, students from more disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to leave school early, while in Ireland they generally remain to the end of upper secondary but

then receive lower exam grades on average. Both dimensions of inequality impact on subsequent life chances but early school leaving has generally been found to have stronger effects in terms of how it limits young people's horizons (Belfield and Levin, 2007).

4.3 PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

The interviews with stakeholders allowed us to probe into some of the reasons underlying the between-system differences in educational outcomes. Stakeholders tend to view the primary system favourably, for taking a child-centred approach and enabling the development of strong literacy and (to some extent) numeracy skills, though they pointed to potential areas for improvement. Both systems have a significant proportion of small schools, with associated challenges in terms of both resourcing and organising teaching and learning. Both systems also have diverse governance structures at primary (and secondary) level, with some variation across sectors in terms of the funding and supports available.

There are some commonalties in the secondary systems with high-stakes exams in both having a backwash effect on learning and skill development. However, differences are evident, with academic selection in Northern Ireland having significant consequences for the social and ability profile of schools and for young people's post-school pathways (Gallagher and Smith, 2000; Brown et al., 2021). In Ireland, while there is no formal selection by ability, residential patterns and active school choice mean that secondary schools differ in their composition, which impacts the post-school destinations pursued by young people (Smyth et al., 2004; McCoy et al., 2014b). However, analyses of the profile of schools show that socio-economic segregation at school level (that is, the extent to which students from different social backgrounds attend different schools) is greater in Northern Ireland than in Ireland. Almost one-quarter (24.4%) of students in Northern Ireland would have to move school to achieve an equal distribution of disadvantaged students across schools; in Ireland, the comparative figure comes to less than one-fifth (18.4%). Furthermore, survey data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicate that being channelled into non-grammar schools is linked to lower educational expectations among socio-economically disadvantaged boys in particular compared to their counterparts in Ireland.

The systems differ not only in their patterns of educational inequality but also in the policy response to educational disadvantage. The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme in Ireland targets additional resources and supports towards schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged communities. The programme was commented on favourably by stakeholders from both jurisdictions and must be seen as a significant contributor to the declining rates of early school leaving found in Ireland. In Northern Ireland, schools with a more disadvantaged profile do receive additional per capita funding but stakeholders noted that such funding is not always targeted towards evidence-

based supports for students. The Northern Ireland Audit Office (2021) came to similar conclusions when it stated that the large amounts of money received by schools, designed to help support those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, were not being sufficiently directed towards those in need, concluding that this made it impossible to review the effectiveness of the money spent. This differs from DEIS considerably, which is much more targeted in nature and subject to ongoing evaluation.

4.4 FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The two systems have some similarities in the orientation of secondary students towards higher education and the perceived 'second-best' nature of further education (McGuinness et al., 2019; Irwin, 2019). However, the systems have important differences in the scale of post-school opportunities and in their configuration within the broader educational landscape.

Stakeholders in Ireland identified the perceived (negative) status of further education as a challenge but also highlighted recent policy developments designed to improve its standing, including further education options being made available through the CAO portal and the expansion of the levels and range of apprenticeships. Research has also pointed to the importance of Post-Leaving Certificate courses as an important route to employment and higher rates of pay as well as a channel to higher education (McGuinness et al., 2019). Developments have also been taking place in Northern Ireland with, at the time of writing, consultations underway regarding a new skills strategy. The sector differs, however, from that in Ireland, not only in the way it has a wide range of providers, with further education courses being offered at further education institutions and secondary schools, but also in the way further education colleges also provide GCSE, A-level and higher education (sub-degree) courses. Several stakeholders highlighted the challenges this poses for young people in navigating their way through available opportunities with potential duplication of offerings across, and resultant competition between, providers.

In both systems, there have been challenges in aligning further education provision with labour market skill requirements. Research in Ireland has pointed to a mismatch between Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) provision and (changes in) labour market demand (McGuinness et al., 2019), though the Regional Skills Fora have since sought to more closely align local providers and employer needs. In Northern Ireland, OECD (2020b) has pointed to good practice at local further education college level but a lack of systematic alignment of provision and skills demand. Furthermore, the scale of provision of intermediate skills does not appear sufficient to meet employer demand in Northern Ireland (OECD, 2020b).

In both systems, stakeholders report funding challenges in higher education. The chief difference between the two systems relates to the significant proportion of

students (26%) from Northern Ireland who pursue higher education outside the jurisdiction, with most (almost two-thirds) failing to return after completion of their studies (Pivotal, 2021). As with further education, stakeholders discussed the challenges in aligning higher education provision with the needs of the labour market.

4.5 NORTH–SOUTH CO-OPERATION

Stakeholder interviews highlighted a small number of examples of active co-operation between North and South,[50] which typically flow from engagement and agreement by both administrations via the North South Ministerial Council. SCoTENS was seen as a very positive exemplar of a space within which educators could share practice and forge links. Close co-operation between inspectorates from the two jurisdictions was also evident, with mutual support around specific projects. Other than these examples, co-operation was seen by stakeholders as being ad hoc and fragmentary in nature, often relying on local champions and/or specific funding initiatives, thus making sustained co-operation more challenging.

This mixed-methods study highlights the way in which educational policy in Ireland and Northern Ireland is embedded in specific historical and socio-political contexts, with different institutional structures and influences. These differences make the direct transfer or borrowing of policy and practice not only challenging but undesirable. Nonetheless, the stakeholders interviewed reported a willingness to engage in co-operation around substantive issues. The fact that both jurisdictions face similar challenges in, among other factors, trying to counter educational disadvantage and to create an inclusive educational system for students with special educational needs (SEN) could provide a starting point for shared dialogue and learning.

4.6 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

This study points to a number of areas where policy could be improved in both jurisdictions. Firstly, the research indicates that there remain substantial barriers for students from disadvantaged backgrounds in both regions; however, these barriers were more pronounced among students from Northern Ireland. Just 21% of students in Northern Ireland whose parents have no upper secondary education go on to attain a post-secondary or higher qualification, with the comparable figure for Ireland standing at 53%. Furthermore, the incidence of early school leaving in Northern Ireland was more than twice that of Ireland and, while children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to be early school leavers in both jurisdictions, the class effect was considerably larger in Northern Ireland.

[50] Not surprisingly, the stakeholders focused more on initiatives that were salient to their own role. Interviews with school principals, for example, may be likely to place more emphasis on school-level support (such as that offered under the PEACE programmes).

While the role of social disadvantage was less pronounced in the Ireland in terms of levels of educational attainment, it was still evident in other areas of educational performance, such as exam outcomes. In Ireland, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are much less likely to obtain high grades in Leaving Certificate examinations compared to those from more affluent households. While respondents to our study across all spectrums of educational provision, from both Northern Ireland and Ireland, were highly complimentary about DEIS provision, there remains more work to done in Ireland in providing DEIS schools with the level of resources needed to address the complexity of need among their student body and in providing supports for disadvantaged students who attend non-DEIS schools. With respect to Northern Ireland, we conclude that the continuation of the transfer examination system, which segregates children into comprehensive and grammar schools at the age of 11, is likely to remain a significant contributory factor to the much higher levels of educational inequality observed there. Transfer test preparation often involves private tuition outside school, with take-up rates higher among higher-income groups; such private tuition thereby confers an advantage in grammar school access among higher-income groups. There was very limited support for the continuation of the transfer test system in Northern Ireland among our study key informants, which re-emphasises the need for substantial policy change in this area.[51] At the same time, lessons from Ireland highlight that the removal of school selection is a necessary but on its own insufficient condition for bringing about greater equality between schools. Attention must be paid to the complex ways in which choice of school and residential segregation at local level contribute to the reproduction of inequality in educational outcomes and supports provided to schools and students to mitigate these effects.

Further education provision in both areas faces a number of ongoing challenges related to a perceived inferior status, compared to higher education options, and a need for improved pathways from schools to further education and from further education to higher education, in order to facilitate meaningful progression routes. In Northern Ireland, the issue is further complicated by a lack of a clear identity of purpose for the sector, with many schools and higher education providers offering post-secondary vocational options, while further education colleges also offer A-level provision, more typically the remit of schools. Our findings also point to substantial disparities between the proportion of students qualifying at post-secondary level in Northern Ireland and in Ireland, an important driver of the gap in educational attainment between the two jurisdictions. While the proportions of young people obtaining third-level qualifications is broadly similar across both areas, just 11% of young people in Northern Ireland are educated to post-secondary level compared to 36% in Ireland. The data point to a need to rapidly expand further education provision in Northern Ireland, in order to facilitate growth in the intermediate skills base and bring provision more in line with that of

[51] It should be noted that academic selection at age 11 has largely been abolished in the other UK regions.

Ireland. Simply expanding further education places is unlikely to provide a solution to the problem of lower relative educational attainment in Northern Ireland if it occurs in the absence of policies designed to demonstrate the value of taking-up of further education routes among young people (and their parents). The necessary reforms of the further education and training (FET) sector in Northern Ireland are likely to require substantial investments and need to be underpinned by a medium-term strategy.

Finally, the research indicated very limited formal cross-border co-operation between education providers and policymakers, despite stakeholders highlighting the value of such co-operation. The study participants felt that increased levels of cross-border collaboration and co-operation were desirable. There was a consensus that any attempts to mandate cross-border co-operation are unlikely to be successful. Instead, a more promising approach would be to provide a structure and frameworks that facilitate co-operation in a mutually beneficial and self-reinforcing way around areas of mutual interest. Stakeholders highlighted the potential for mutual learning around educational disadvantage and the inclusion of students with SEN. The SCoTENS initiative provides a potential blueprint that could inform any future initiatives designed to facilitate increased cross-border co-operation in the realm of education.

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