

# Education Inequalities in Northern Ireland

## Summary Report

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## Background and Aims of the Research

The School of Education at Queen's University Belfast was commissioned to carry out research on education inequalities in Northern Ireland on behalf of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland is working towards an update of its 2007 'Statement on Key Inequalities in Northern Ireland'; this statement identified education as one of six broad areas where inequalities existed and needed to be addressed, noting that education plays a key role in determining a person's life chances and opportunities in terms of social and economic mobility.

To inform the update of the 2007 statement, this research investigates current educational inequalities in Northern Ireland - giving consideration to the levels of educational access, attainment, progression and destination across the nine equality grounds (gender, age, religious belief, political opinion, racial group, disability, sexual orientation, dependant status and marital status) as well as other grounds wherein inequalities in education have been observed, such as whether a child has been in care and children at risk of poverty. The research findings should assist in understanding the contributory factors and manifestation of educational inequalities for different groups, and thus provide feedback and recommendations for policies and actions aimed at improving educational opportunities for those affected.

The overall aim of the research is:

*To provide an up-to-date evidence base leading to the robust identification of new and/or persistent key inequalities in education in Northern Ireland as a whole, and individually for each of the nine equality grounds.*

## Methodology

The main data sources for this investigation were from the Department of Education and the Department of Employment and Learning Northern Ireland, for the years 2007/08 to 2011/12. Supplementary data were obtained from the Census, the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, and the Labour Force Survey. In parallel to this, a literature review was carried out to identify barriers and enablers of educational success for the different equality groups, including studies and reports from Northern Ireland, Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. Interviews, focus groups, and an engagement event with key stakeholders were required to fill data gaps as identified by the quantitative analyses.

## Key Research Findings

### Gender

In regard to gender and educational attainment, a key finding was the persistent attainment gap between males and females, and the fact that this gap consistently increased, to the detriment of males, after leaving primary school: there was an increase in the gap between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3, and it widened as the school years progressed up to A Level (see Figure 1). The literature review highlighted that many of the barriers to education for males identified in other studies include frustration with the formal nature of the classroom, some teachers having lower expectations of males, and a lack of connection between curriculum content and the lives of many males. This finding therefore raises a question of whether there are elements of the school day structure and curriculum in Northern Ireland that do not suit the specific needs of many males. That question is also related to the persistent underachievement of males, specifically males from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The recommendations on enablers for educational equality (particularly in regard to increasing the attainment rates of males) from the literature review and the qualitative data on gender, such as increasing flexibility in the way the curriculum is delivered (as previously mentioned above) and increasing male (particularly working class male) role models in schools need to be appropriately incorporated into policy and implemented into practice.

**Figure 1: Percentage point gap in achievement between males and females in 2011/12 – gap in favour of females**



The literature indicated that social disadvantage (as measured by free school meals entitlement) can also impact on type of school attended, with socially disadvantaged children less likely to attend grammar schools<sup>1</sup>. The present study found that the type of school was a strong predictor of attainment (and destination after leaving school).

<sup>1</sup> See Atkinson A., Gregg, P. and McConnell, B. (2006). *The Result of 11+ Selection: An Investigation into Opportunities and Outcomes for Pupils in Selective LEAs*, CMPO Working Paper No. 06/150. Bristol: Centre for Market and Public Organisation, University of Bristol.

Lower attainment also impacts on male entry to higher education – the gender gap in this regard is reflective of the gap at A Level, with females more likely to go on to higher education than males – and this is likely to have an impact on the composition of the future graduate workforce in Northern Ireland. However, when examining subject choice in higher education, males are much more likely than females to enter the STEM subject area of ‘Maths, IT, Engineering and Technology’. Given that the types of industries that are currently growing in Northern Ireland are more aligned with these STEM subject areas, more analysis needs to be conducted regarding the type of jobs that these leavers enter, as they may be more secure, and higher paying, jobs than other leavers (i.e. the mostly female leavers) from further and higher education obtain.

There is also an urgent need for the educational needs of transgender young people to be addressed in central policy directives. At present, little is known about their exact rates of educational attainment, progression and their destinations after leaving education, but from what is known about the barriers they face in their educational journeys, much more could be done centrally in order to give schools and educational institutions directives on how to support transgender young people and deal with transphobic bullying and discrimination.

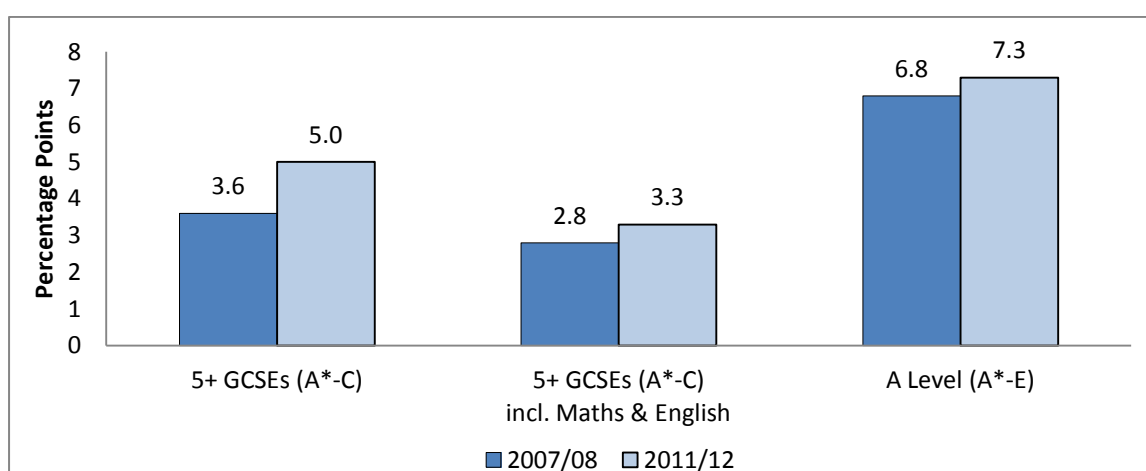
## Age

There were two key findings in relation to age and education, both of which were related to further education. Firstly, there was a clear age profile difference between accredited and non-accredited courses – on accredited courses, the majority of enrolees were under the age of 25 years, while the majority of enrolees on non-accredited courses were over the age of 25 years. Notably, participation of the older age groups (56+ years) decreased on non-accredited courses whilst participation for younger groups slightly increased between 2007/08 and 2011/12. This is an emergent inequality. Secondly, younger ‘Leavers’ from the Steps to Work programme (aged under 25 years) were persistently more likely to gain employment and sustain employment after completing their course. Therefore, the disadvantage that older groups face in finding employment and sustaining employment after job training programmes compared to younger age groups is a persistent inequality. The qualitative research also identified the impact of intergenerational disadvantage on present and future generations of learners, in that, negative past educational experiences can create negative perceptions of education that can be passed onto the next generation thus creating ‘poverty of aspiration’.

## Religious Belief

In terms of religion and educational attainment, the key finding was a persistent and overarching trend of higher proportions of Catholics achieving the education targets in all three areas (GCSEs, GCSEs including English and Maths, and A Levels), than both Protestants and 'Others'<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the gap between Catholics and Protestants widened between 2007/08 and 2011/12 for all three education targets (see Figure 2). Therefore, this is a persistent, and increasing, inequality.

**Figure 2: Percentage point gap in achievement between Catholics and Protestants in 2007/08 and 2011/12– gap in favour of Catholics**



Larger differences emerged when looking at the destinations of school leavers – Catholics were persistently more likely to enter higher education than other groups while Protestants were persistently more likely than the other groups to enter job training. In further education courses, Catholics represented a greater share of enrollees than Protestants, however Protestants had larger shares of retention and successful completion than the other groups<sup>3</sup>. Catholics and those of 'Other' religions had lesser degrees of success with obtaining employment after leaving the Steps to Work programme than Protestants.

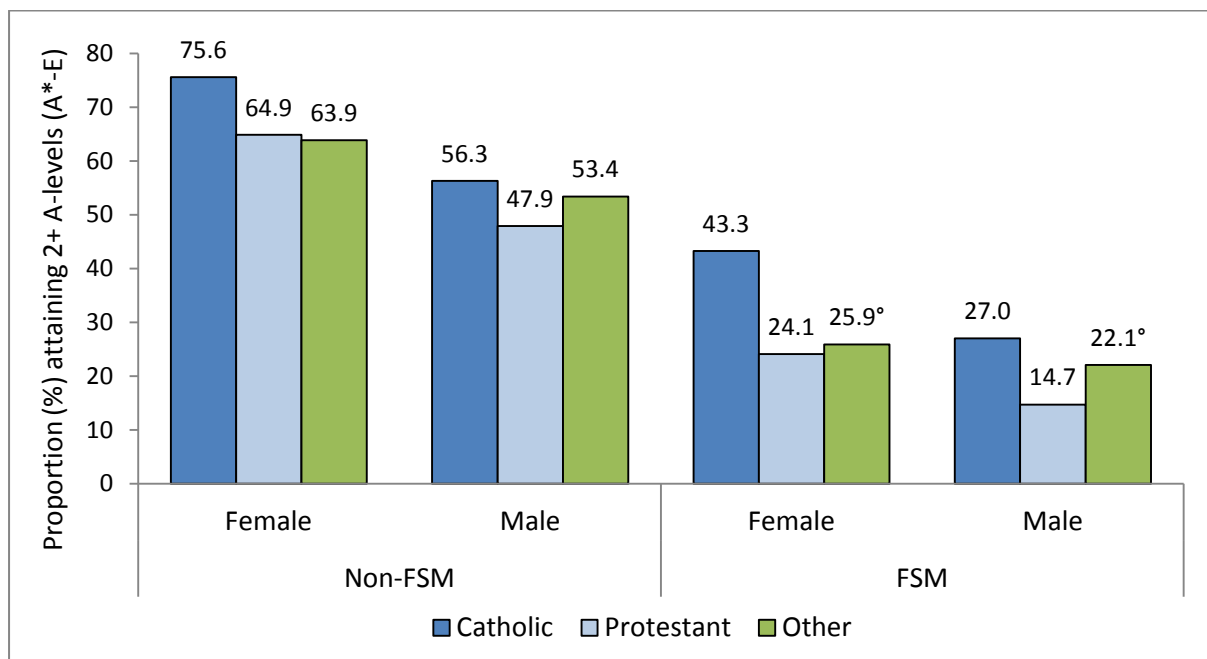
Within higher education, Catholics were over-represented in both undergraduate and postgraduate enrolments. There was a trend of slightly increasing shares of enrolment for Catholics and stagnant shares of enrolment for Protestant – this resulted in a small widening of the gap between Protestants and Catholics in higher education. This is a persistent inequality.

<sup>2</sup> 'Other' refers to those all those who do not identify as Protestant or Catholic and therefore could include those of other/unknown religions and those of no religion.

<sup>3</sup> Given the high percentage of those of unknown religion in accredited courses, Essential Skills and non-accredited courses, care must be taken when interpreting these results as some of these 'unknowns' may be Protestant, Catholic, of a non-Christian religion or of no religion.

A key inequality outlined in the Equality Commission’s 2008 statement on education inequalities<sup>4</sup> was the underachievement and lack of progression of male working class Protestants. This inequality has persisted – Protestant males entitled to free school meals were found to have the lowest GCSE and A Level attainment rates (see Figure 3), the highest proportions of non-attainment, and the lowest proportions of school leavers moving on to higher education of all gender/religion/FSM categories.

**Figure 3: Proportion of school leavers attaining 2+ A Levels (A\*-C) by gender, religion and FSM status, 2011/12**



° Note that the number is less than 40

Given that any young people (no matter what gender or religion) who are entitled to free school meals have lower proportions of attainment and progression than those who are not, the particular barriers to educational equality for Protestant males must be considered closely – in other words, the question of why their attainment is so far behind Catholic males or Protestant females who are entitled to free school meals must be considered and addressed. From the limited qualitative data gathered in this research and a review of the literature, some of these barriers for Protestant males include: intergenerational mistrust and negativity towards the benefits of education; the divided nature of the school system in Northern Ireland and lower post-16 provision in controlled schools; a lack of male working-class role models in schools; and weakened community infrastructure in urban Protestant areas in particular.

<sup>4</sup> Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. (2008a). *Inequalities in Education – Facts and Trends 1998-2008*. Belfast: ECNI.

Despite the persistent and wide gender and religion gaps in attainment, the factors that appear to be most strongly associated with the greatest levels of inequality in terms of attainment (no matter what gender or religion a child is) are the socio-economic background of a child (as currently measured by free school meals entitlement) and attendance (or not) at a grammar school. If educational inequalities in Northern Ireland are to be redressed in any meaningful way, steps need to be taken to help children who do not have as many resources at home as others (whether in terms of material resources or social capital) to reach their full academic potential. It is crucial that improving educational outcomes for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds remains a priority in educational policy and that their outcomes continue to be closely monitored, especially against the background of the debate over academic selection at the age of 11 years<sup>5</sup>.

### **Political Opinion**

While there is a lack of available quantitative data on education outcomes for this equality ground, the quantitative data showed that unionists appeared to be doing less well than nationalists and neither in terms of highest qualification – this is perhaps reflective of the patterns of highest qualification by religion. Educational inequalities by political opinion were closely related to the inequalities found by religious background. There was a strong feeling amongst stakeholders that if the issue of the underachievement of Protestant males was adequately addressed, many of the perceived barriers to education articulated by unionist students in higher education would be solved.

However, other barriers were experienced by students of both ends of the political spectrum. In particular, the finding regarding the emphasis on political neutrality within many educational establishments is a worrying one. These students felt that their progression in higher education (and the likelihood of entering their preferred destinations afterwards) was hampered if they overtly stated their political affiliations. The expected silence and secrecy that surrounds the holding of political affiliations is an unhealthy symptom in a democratic society, especially in educational institutions wherein debate is a crucial aspect of learning. The recommendations of the stakeholders regarding enabling openness about political differences, especially amongst young people, need to be addressed with educational establishments.

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<sup>5</sup> As highlighted in Chapter 3 of the full report, children who are entitled to FSM are less likely to be selected for grammar school, regardless of test scores.

## Ethnicity

Overall, a key finding from the review of quantitative data and literature review was the limited available data and/or research on key ethnic groups in Northern Ireland and the need for more detailed reporting of ethnicity within education<sup>6</sup>.

In support of findings from the literature review, minority ethnic and Newcomer<sup>7</sup> children were more likely to attend non-grammar secondary schools and represent a greater share of children within the integrated school sector. It is important to note that data for both ethnic minority and Newcomer pupils were subject to low sample size. A range of factors that represented barriers to accessing grammar education was identified in the literature and qualitative research including the use of tests to determine admission and lack of knowledge of the educational system.

While a high proportion of minority ethnic school leavers attained 2+ A Levels (similar to the proportion of white school leavers), the research showed that there was also a high proportion of minority ethnic school leavers who left school with no GCSEs, and an emergent inequality is that they were less likely to attain 2+ A Levels or 5+ GCSEs (particularly 5+ GCSEs including Maths and English) than their white peers. This was a reversal in the trend observed in 2007/08. This pattern of results for minority ethnic school leavers was shown to be particularly strong for minority ethnic females – while they were more likely than their male counterparts to achieve 2+ A Levels, they were also much more likely to leave school with no GCSEs (see Figure 4). More research is needed on the educational experiences of minority ethnic females in Northern Ireland to better understand this trend. Furthermore, while minority ethnic school leavers were slightly more likely than white school leavers to enter higher education, they were also over twice as likely to enter unemployment after leaving school – and this is an emergent inequality since 2007/08.

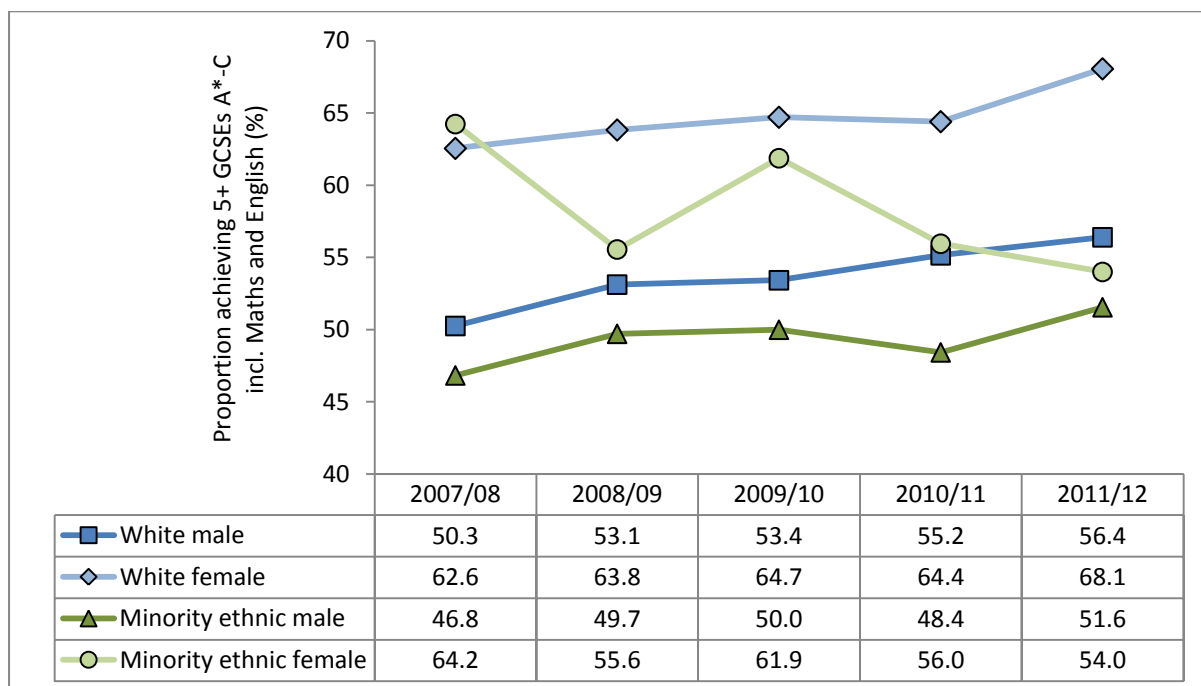
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<sup>6</sup> Although a more detailed breakdown of ethnic minorities is currently collected by the institutions, it is not reported due to small numbers.

<sup>7</sup> The term ‘Newcomer’ pupils refers to a child or young person who has enrolled in a school but who does not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum and does not have a language in common with the teacher.



**Figure 4: Proportion of school leavers attaining 5+ GCSEs (A\*-C) including Maths and English by ethnicity and gender, 2007/08 - 2011/12**



The research revealed that there is a continued relationship between low educational attainment and other types of social exclusion and marginalisation experienced by children from the Traveller community and Roma children. These children and young people were found to have some of the lowest proportions of attainment of all groups who were considered in the course of this research. This has been a persistent trend since the last Equality Commission statement on educational inequalities published in 2008. The qualitative data and other literature gathered for these groups in the current research indicates that while steps have been taken to redress these inequalities by government departments and the Education and Library Boards, there are further ways that education equality could be enabled, such as: placing the rights and needs of children first; providing more support for parents; more engagement and consultation with the groups at hand; and more joined-up departmental working.

From qualitative data, a lack of recognition of diversity in the needs of Newcomer children and a lack of understanding of the Northern Ireland education system by Newcomer parents may present a barrier to educational equality. Furthermore, the funding available to support Newcomer children and the attitudes of schools towards Newcomer children may present both a barrier and enabler to educational inequality. Finally, unrecognised multiple inequalities, particularly in relation to disability and special educational needs, may present an additional barrier to educational equality for Newcomer and minority ethnic children.

Minority ethnic representation in further education courses and on the job training, apprenticeships and employment programmes is approximately in proportion with their representation in the Northern Ireland population as a whole. However, minority ethnic students had lower retention and achievement on accredited courses in further education than white students. However, in contrast to the situation four years ago, minority ethnic students in 2011/12 were proportionally more likely to find employment or sustain 13 weeks employment after leaving the Steps to Work programme than white students.

While minority ethnic groups were found to be well represented in higher education (particularly in all STEM subjects), the data on their progression showed that minority ethnic students were less likely to gain full or part-time employment after leaving higher education than white students (in contrast to their progression after the Steps to Work programme) – this is an emergent inequality. It is therefore pertinent that the barriers to employment for minority ethnic leavers from school and from higher education are considered in more depth, and that more quantitative data and research is gathered on the experiences of Roma children in Northern Ireland in particular, as so little is known about this group.

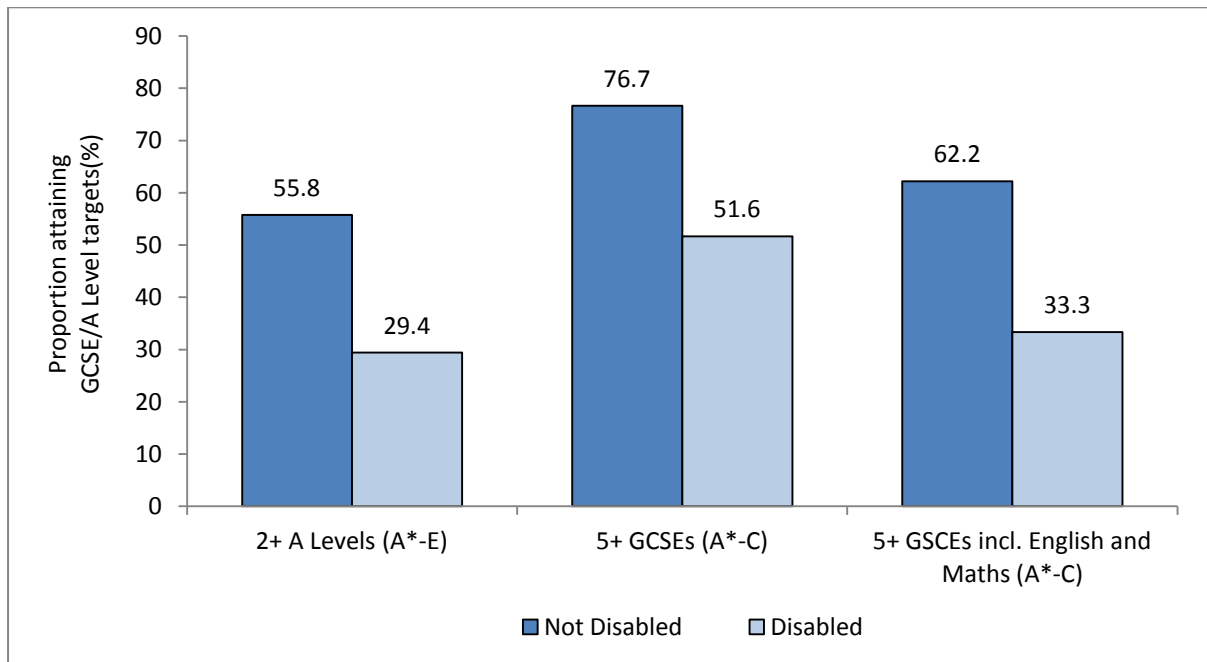
### **Disability and Special Educational Needs**

In terms of the attainment of school leavers<sup>8</sup>, while there were increases in the proportion of school leavers with any SEN or a disability achieving 2+ A Levels (A\*-E) and 5+ GCSES (A\*-C), their attainment proportions are still substantially below the attainment proportion for pupils who do not have a special educational need or a disability (see Figure 5). This is reflective of the literature review which highlighted concerns that the existing provisions in mainstreams schools, to meet the needs of pupils with disabilities, were lacking. The lower attainment of students with SEN or a disability is a persistent inequality. For each category of attainment and across each SEN group, females outperformed their male counterparts (see Figure 6).

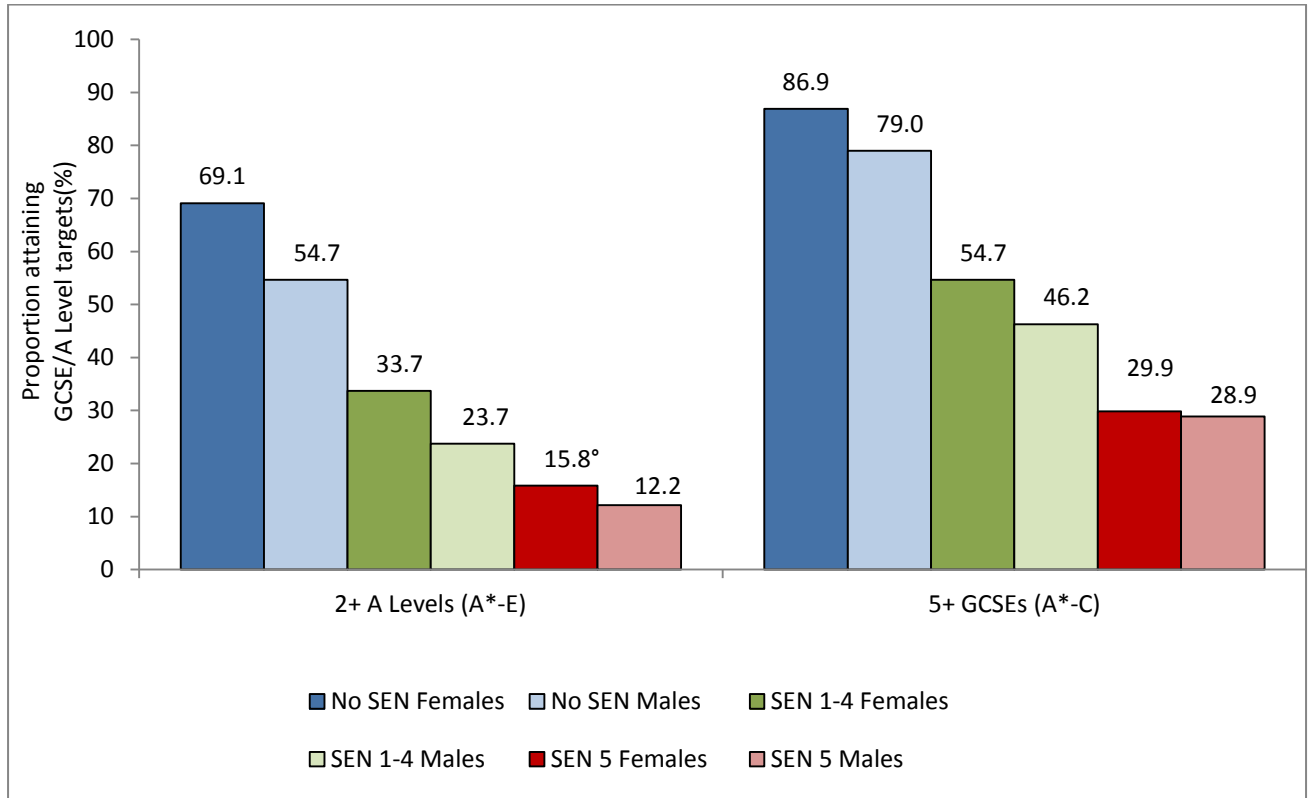
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<sup>8</sup> Attainment data presented in this report only covers SEN pupils in mainstream schools. There is no data available on attainment of pupils in special schools.

**Figure 5: Proportion attaining GCSE and A Level attainment targets by disability status, 2011/12**



**Figure 6: Proportion attaining GCSE and A Level attainment targets by SEN status and gender, 2011/12**



° Note that the number is less than 40

School leavers with no SEN or disability were much more likely than those with any SEN or disability to enter higher education. This is a persistent inequality, and reflects findings in the literature review which also noted that students without a disability were more likely to enrol in higher education than those with a disability. While school leavers with any SEN or disability were more likely to enter further education or job training than school leavers without a disability, on several further education courses and job training programmes the shares of enrollees with a self-reported disability were lower than the share of people in Northern Ireland with a self-reported disability or illness. Leavers from the Steps to Work programme in further education who self-reported a disability were less likely to have either moved into employment or sustained 13 weeks of employment than participants who did not self-report a disability. This is a persistent inequality.

In higher education, students with a disability were underrepresented in postgraduate and 'part-time/other' enrolments. This is a persistent inequality. By 2010/11, leavers from higher education who did not have a disability were more likely to enter full-time work than leavers with a disability, and leavers with a disability were more likely to do enter part-time work. These are also persistent inequalities.

The quantitative and qualitative data gathered for the equality ground of disability and SEN reinforced how important it is for these two categories to be considered separately in addressing the educational needs of both. Not all disabled young people have a statement of special educational needs; but it appears that at times the educational needs of some disabled young people can be overlooked if they do not have a statement that outlines for schools how exactly their needs should be met. Furthermore, it appears that disability is often underreported by schools, parents and perhaps in further and higher education – this makes understanding the needs and outcomes of people with disabilities in regard to education difficult to fully realise.

## **Sexual Orientation**

In regard to sexual orientation, while available data from the literature review suggested that homophobic bullying is prevalent in Northern Irish schools, it is difficult to measure the direct impact this has on their educational attainment and progression. The limited quantitative data available demonstrated that young people who reported same sex attraction were much more likely to be bullied in school than their peers who reported opposite sex attraction only. This reflects findings in both the literature review and the qualitative data.

The qualitative research and literature have shown that if schools and colleges are able to create an ethos of openness, support and acknowledgement of LGB issues via the curriculum and 'hidden' curriculum (that is, the classroom materials that are used, the way teachers handle instances of homophobic bullying, the language that is used in a school to discuss these issues, the presence or absence of student support groups/helpline posters and so on), major strides will be made towards achieving educational equality for LGB young people. The qualitative data in particular suggested that these steps need to be underpinned by changes to educational and equality legislation if long-term and meaningful improvements are to be realised in all schools in Northern Ireland, not just a few.

## **Marital Status and Dependency Status**

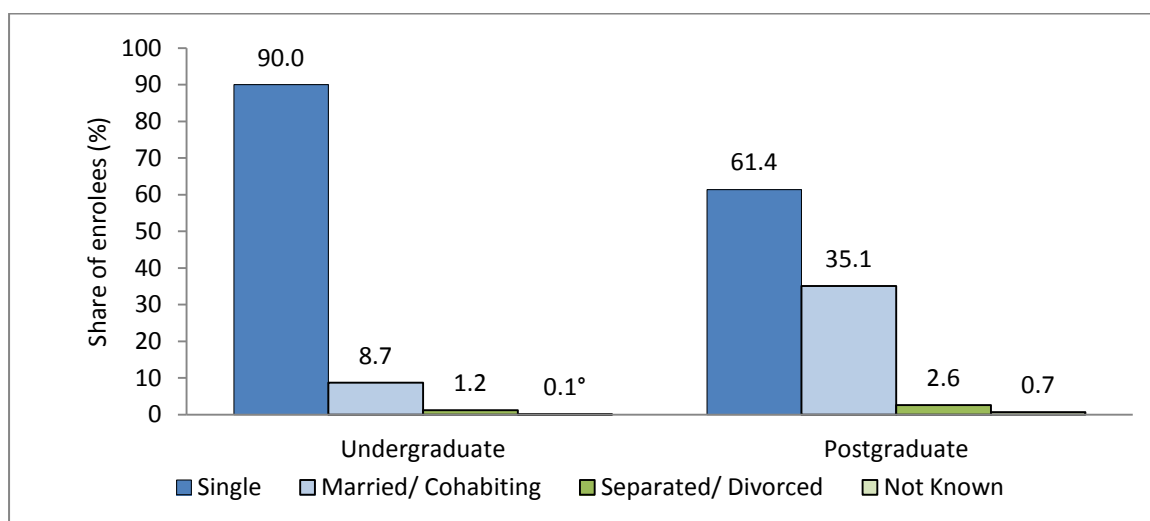
The findings for those of different marital and dependency status and of different age groups could be argued as being closely related, as the educational inequalities they face are likely related to peoples' life trajectories. With increased age comes increased barriers to accessing or returning to education, such as caring and parenting responsibilities; a lack of available and affordable childcare or flexible respite care; other financial burdens such as fees, materials and travel costs; less time; and previous negative experiences of education. The vast majority of enrollees on most further or higher education courses or job training programmes were young, single people with no dependants.

The findings for progression and achievement in further education accredited courses were most positive for those who were married/in a civil partnership/co-habiting – they had better achievement and retention rates than single students - and those who had dependants had better achievement rates in accredited courses than those who had no dependants. It appears that enabling older students and those with dependents to enrol in further education in the first place is the key challenge. Older people (aged 50 years and older), those who were separated or divorced, and those with dependants were less likely to gain employment after leaving a job

training programme. However, those who had been married/in a civil partnership/co-habiting did not have the same difficulties finding employment after leaving a job training programme.

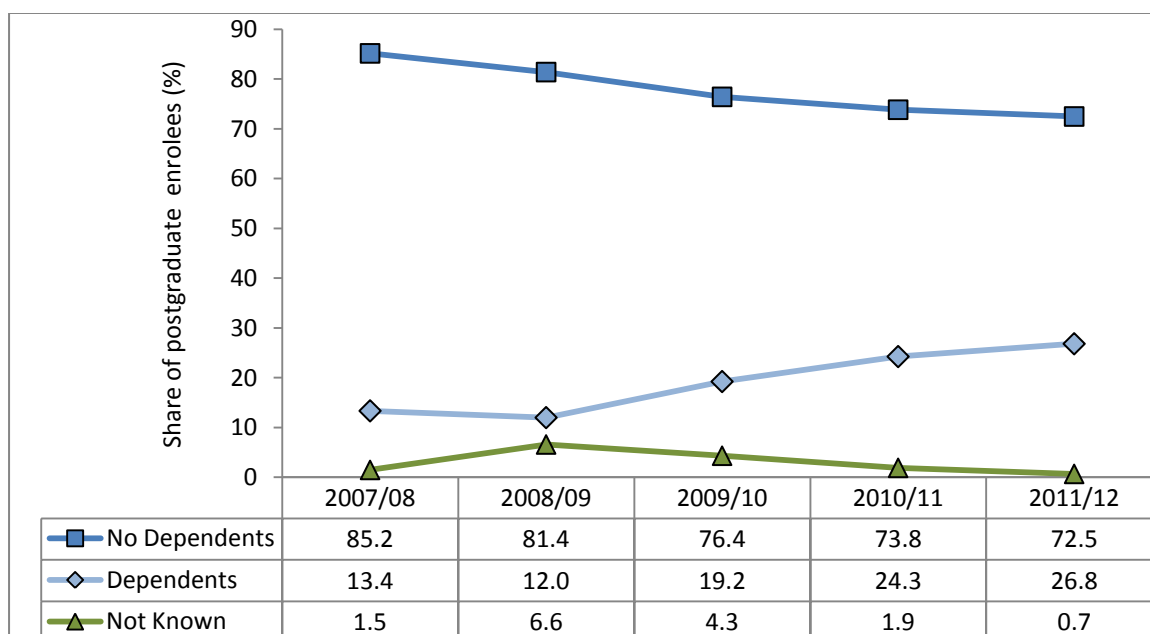
In terms of higher education, those who were not single and those with dependents were better represented on postgraduate and 'part-time/other' courses than undergraduate and 'full-time/sandwich' courses (see Figure 7). Furthermore, the share of those with dependents on postgraduate courses increased over the time period from 2007/08-2011/12 (see Figure 8).

**Figure 7: Share of undergraduate and postgraduate enrolees by marital status, 2011/12**



° Note that the number is less than 40

**Figure 8: Share of postgraduate enrolees by dependency status, 2007/08 - 2011/12**



The findings also showed that some higher education subject areas were more accessible for those over 25 years or older age groups, people who are married/co-habiting/in a civil partnership, and those who have dependants – ‘Medicine, Dentistry, and Subjects Allied to Medicine’ and ‘Social Studies and Law’. Reasons as to why these subject areas are more attractive for people from these equality grounds than other subjects should be explored in more depth – it may be due to the enablers that were articulated by stakeholders, such as flexible frameworks of delivery for some courses, and the marketing of these courses to ‘mature students’, carers, and so on. Those aged under 25 years, single people, and those with no dependants, were least likely to move into full-time work after leaving higher education. This may imply that older groups, those who have been married/in a civil partnership/co-habiting, and those who have dependants in higher education may be those who are already in employment or have been given leave by their employers to study.

It is also worth noting how useful it is to make the distinction between those who are parents and those who look after a sick or disabled person with care needs. The qualitative data further revealed the specific barriers and enablers to education for young carers. Further disaggregation of the data on educational outcomes by dependency status would help to illuminate carers’ and younger carers’ specific needs.

### **Lack of Data**

Finally, it must be stated that the general lack of knowledge and data on the educational access, attainment, progression and destinations of transgender people, people of different political opinions, Roma people, and people of different sexual orientations, could be viewed as key inequalities in themselves, and must be addressed in the first instance if educational equality is to be achieved for all.

## Key Inequalities Across all Grounds

The following key inequalities have been chosen from the research based on their persistence or new emergence across the years examined, as well as where several equality grounds have been observed to be particularly disadvantaged in one or more of the four areas of concern: educational access, attainment, progression and destination.

### Access

- There was a widening of the gap in undergraduate and postgraduate enrolment in higher education between Protestants and Catholics, to the detriment of Protestants.
- There is self-exclusion or forced exclusion from school of gender variant or transgender young people, and young people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual. Young people of different political opinions may also self-exclude themselves from particular courses and campuses of higher education.
- There was a persistent underrepresentation of pupils who are Newcomer or from minority ethnic backgrounds, pupils who are entitled to FSM, and pupils who are from a care background in grammar schools.
- People with disabilities were underrepresented in enrolments in postgraduate and 'part-time/other' courses in higher education.
- There was a persistent underrepresentation of older people, people who were previously or are currently married/in a civil partnership/co-habiting, and people who have dependants in most further and higher education courses and job training programmes.
- On accredited courses, non-accredited courses in further education, and in Training for Success, the shares of enrolees with dependants decreased over the time period examined. This is an emergent inequality.

### Attainment

- Of great concern is the lower educational attainment of males, particularly Protestant males and all pupils who are entitled to free school meals. These attainment gaps are persistent inequalities and have yet to be addressed.
- Catholics consistently had higher achievement proportions than Protestants at post-primary level and this gap widened over the time period.



- Since 2007/08, there has been a reversal of patterns in the proportion of minority ethnic and white school leavers achieving attainment targets at GCSE and A Level between 2007/08 and 2011/12. In particular, the attainment proportions of female minority ethnic pupils in general decreased since 2007/08, while Irish Traveller school leavers had persistently low attainment throughout the time period examined.
- There were persistently lower proportions of educational attainment for pupils with disabilities, pupils who have special educational needs, and pupils from a care background. Despite increases in their attainment proportions since 2007/08, the attainment gaps widened.
- Widowed people had the lowest achievement rate out of all other marital status groups in accredited courses in further education.
- Those with dependants were more likely to successfully complete accredited further education courses than those who did not have dependants. In the general population, those who are carers were much less likely than others to have higher education as their highest qualification level.

### Progression

- Males fall further behind females in their progression from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3.
- Catholics and those from 'Other' religions, minority ethnic groups, and separated/divorced people were more likely to leave accredited professional and technical further education courses early than other groups.
- Those aged 25 years and older were less likely than younger age groups to receive job training while in employment.
- Students with overt political affiliations, particularly those studying subject areas such as politics or history, do not feel able to debate or interrogate their political opinions while in their courses.

### Destinations

- Upon leaving school, females were less likely than males to enter employment and job training programmes and the subject area of 'Maths, IT, Engineering and Technology' in higher education; males were underrepresented in accredited and non-accredited further education courses and in all subject areas in higher education (except 'Maths, IT, Engineering and Technology'). These trends are persistent inequalities.

- Students aged 25 years and older, students from marital status groups other than 'single', and students with dependants in higher education were persistently less likely to enrol in the STEM subject area of 'Maths, IT, Engineering and Technology'. Students with a disability represented the smallest share of enrolees 'Medicine, Dentistry, and Subjects Allied to Medicine'.
- Compared to other groups within the equality grounds, there were persistently lower proportions of school leavers entering higher education from the following groups: Protestants, 'Others'; school leavers who have a disability or any special educational needs; school leavers who are Traveller; young people from a care background; and young people who receive free school meals.
- The proportion of minority ethnic school leavers going onto higher education has decreased (dramatically so for minority ethnic females), while the proportion of white school leavers entering higher education has increased slightly over the five year period – the ethnicity gap has therefore narrowed to the detriment of minority ethnic students.
- Students with a disability, minority ethnic students, students aged 20 years and under, and single students were much less likely to enter full-time paid work upon leaving higher education than other groups.
- Older leavers (aged 50 years and older), separated/divorced leavers, leavers who had dependants, and leavers who had a self-reported disability were persistently less likely to gain employment and sustain employment after completion of job training programmes.

### Other Key Inequalities

- The lack of available and/or robust data on the educational access, attainment, progression and destinations of several groups hinders progress being made on redressing the educational inequalities they may face. These groups include: transgender people; people from 'Other' religious group categories (i.e. disaggregation of this category is needed); people of different political opinions; Roma people and Eastern European immigrants (as they are classed as 'white' within official statistics); people with disabilities; people of different sexual orientations; and young people in transition (whether from leaving care or having been a carer to someone).