



Queen's University  
Belfast

The Centre for  
Shared Education

SCHOOL OF  
Education

Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

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# Education Inequalities in Northern Ireland

A research report for children & young people



## What is the 'Equality Commission for Northern Ireland?'

The Equality Commission has an important job to do – it tries to make sure that everyone is treated fairly and equally, no matter who they are or where they come from, so that Northern Ireland is a place where people feel respected and valued. The Equality Commission paid for this research to be carried out.

## What is the 'Centre for Shared Education'?

The Centre for Shared Education is based at the School of Education in Queen's University Belfast. The people who work there carry out research projects which explore how schools can be places where everyone feels included, so that pupils do the best they can. It was researchers from the Centre who completed this piece of research.

## How did the researchers find out the results?

We got a LOT of numbers sent to us from people who work in the government, and we did a LOT of maths calculations with them to work out differences between groups of people in things such as their Key Stage 2, 3 and GCSE results, and enrolments in schools and different types of courses. We also asked different groups of people about the types of things which they think make it difficult to have equality for everyone in school or college, and the things that might help to make education more equal.

## What was this research about?

The Equality Commission wanted to find out about which groups of people in Northern Ireland experience the most inequality (or unfairness) when it comes to attending school or college, doing well in school or college, achieving the best results possible, and going to the places or courses that people want to go to after they leave school or college.

The last time the Equality Commission looked at who was affected by these problems was in 2007, so it was time to take a look at more recent information to see if the same groups of people are still affected by these problems in 2012, and whether there are any new problems that have come up since 2007.





## What did the researchers find out?

### 1. Inequalities in who attends certain types of schools, colleges and courses

- Pupils with special educational needs, pupils who are new to Northern Ireland or who are from minority ethnic groups, and pupils who have been in foster care or a residential home are less likely to go to grammar schools than other types of schools.
- Young people who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual and those who are transgender (people born as boys who feel they should be female, and those born as girls who feel they should be male) may feel like they do not 'fit in' at their school, especially if they are being bullied. Sometimes these young people take themselves out of classes (such as PE) because of this, or they feel under pressure to (or want to) move to a different school.
- People who are 25 years or older, people who are married or living with their partner or in a civil partnership (when two men or two women decide to spend their lives together), and people who have children or who care for someone who is sick or disabled make up very small numbers in college, university and job training courses.

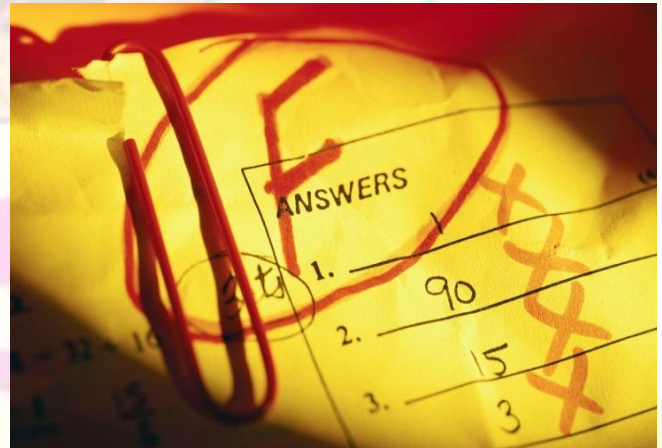


### 2. Problems with staying on track in school or staying on courses in college

- When moving from P7 into Year 8/Form 1 in post-primary school, boys fall further behind girls in how well they do in school.
  - Students sometimes feel like they can't be open about their ideas regarding politics at university, especially if they are studying politics or history.
- The following groups of people had more difficulty than other groups with staying on professional courses they started (courses which lead to qualifications): Catholics and people from other (not Protestant) religions; people from minority ethnic groups; and people who are divorced or separated.

### 3. Problems with achieving the best results possible

- For all years from 2007 and 2012, boys - especially Protestant boys - and pupils from less well-off families were less likely than other groups to achieve the highest Key Stage 2, 3, GCSE, and A Level results than other pupils.
- Although results have been getting better for everyone since 2007, some groups of people are still struggling to catch up with others. This includes pupils with disabilities, pupils with special educational needs, and pupils who have lived with foster parents or in a residential home.
- Since 2007, there have been high numbers of young people from minority ethnic backgrounds (especially girls from these groups, and Traveller young people) who left school with no GCSEs. There has also been a large drop in the number of girls from minority ethnic backgrounds who achieved five GCSEs or two or more A Levels.



### 4. Problems with going where you want to go after leaving school or after leaving a course

- There are fewer girls than boys in job training programmes or in technology, engineering or mathematics subjects at university, but there are fewer boys than girls in all other university courses.
- After leaving school, people with disabilities or special educational needs, young people who have been in foster care or a residential home, and young people from less well-off families are less likely than other groups to get into university.
- After leaving school, young people from minority ethnic groups are much more likely than white people to be unemployed, and this gap has gotten worse since 2007.
- After leaving university, students who have disabilities, students who are under 25, students from smaller ethnic groups, and single students were much less likely to get a full-time job than other groups of students (and this been the case since 2007).
- The following groups of people were less likely to get a job after leaving job training courses: older people; people who are separated or divorced; people who have children or who care for someone who is sick or disabled; and people who have disabilities.

**BUT...**  
**WHY??**

## Things that could be making educational equality worse for:

**Boys:** The things that are taught in school and the way that the school day is designed might not suit some boys in particular.

**Older People:** Often, older people have others (children or relatives) to look after, which gives them less time (and perhaps less money) to go to college or university. Older people might also be put off going back to education if they had bad experiences before in school.

**Lesbian, gay and bisexual people:** These groups of people may be dealing with bullying in school; they may feel like they don't 'fit in'.

**Protestants:** There may be disadvantages for Protestants because of the way that schools in Northern Ireland are divided – in the schools that Protestants mostly go to there are fewer opportunities to study A Levels than in Catholic schools.

**People with special educational needs:** Some people might have low expectations of what young people who have special educational needs can achieve, which can impact on how well they do in exams. Moving schools from primary into secondary or grammar school can also be more difficult for these young people with additional needs since their new school teachers won't know as much about their needs as their primary school teacher. Lastly, children who have to wait for a long time to see a psychologist about a special educational need might be missing out on the extra support they need in the meantime.

**People who are transgender:** Teachers, principals and college staff might not even understand what being transgender means or know how to help a young person who wants to be a different gender.

**People with disabilities:** People who have 'hidden' disabilities (disabilities that others can't 'see') or long-term illnesses might not be receiving the extra support they need. People who have problems with moving around might also have trouble accessing some school or college facilities and buildings.

**Married people, people in a civil partnership, or living with a partner:** The barriers to equality for these people were often seen as the same as the barriers for older people. These include the time and costs needed to go back into education as an adult, as well as a lack of support if someone has children or sick relatives or friends to look after too.

**People who care for children or look after sick or disabled relatives:** It is sometimes difficult for people who look after others who are ill or who have disabilities to know where they will be on a particular day or time, if they have to attend a lot of hospital appointments. Because of this, strict timetables at school and college can sometimes be hard for them to stick to. Children and young people who care for someone might also find it harder to get the support they need after they turn 18, since they will no longer be able to attend young carers' support groups.

**Children and young people from less well-off families:** Sometimes people have low expectations about what children and young people who don't have a lot of money can achieve at school. These young people may think that they don't 'belong' in places like universities. They also have less money to pay for things like private tutors to help them with exams or books and resources for school or college, and they might be put off applying for university because of the high costs of that too.

**Question for discussion:** Do you have any other ideas which might explain why these groups of people (and other groups) experience inequalities when it comes to their education?





## Things that could help to create educational equality for:

**Older people and adults who are married or who look after someone else:** Courses in college and in university could be more 'adult-friendly' and 'family-friendly' by being flexible in terms of where and how the courses are given; they could provide more childcare or support for people who need to take a break from looking after someone to do their studies; and universities and colleges could do more to let people know about the support that is already available for them.

**People of different political opinions:** When pupils and students are educated together in shared ways, this might help people to be more open about their political opinions with others, and increase the number of opportunities and resources available to students too.

**Pupils who come to Northern Ireland from other countries:** Schools could provide more support to children and young people who perhaps do not speak English as their first language. The fact that they might need more help and support (such as maybe having special educational needs) could be picked up better too.

**Children and young people who have been fostered or who have lived in residential homes:** When decisions are being made about where a young person who is in care should live, more attention should be given to the impact that the decision will have on the young person's education; for example, whether they will have to change schools.

**People who are transgender:** The government could give more guidelines to schools on how they can help a young person who wants to be a different gender, and teachers could be given more training on how to help them too.

**Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people:** Schools and colleges could do more to create open and welcoming environments to support LGB people; for example, by talking more in classrooms about the issues that LGB people face, having support groups for them, and by quickly tackling any bullying that takes place. There could be more guidance from the government and better laws made to protect the rights of LGB people.

**Children and young people from less well-off families:** When schools work together to share their resources and facilities, this can help all young people achieve more highly, no matter what their background. Schools that have high numbers of young people from less well-off families could also be given more money to support these pupils, and universities should include these pupils in more of their activities and 'taster' days to help them see what support is there for them and what life at university could be like.

### **Overall, we need to know much more about education inequalities for:**

Roma children and children from other particular races and ethnicity groups; people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual; people who have different political opinions; people who have been in foster care or who care for someone else; and transgender people.

If we knew more about what these groups of people face when they are in school or college, it would be easier to start doing things to help them to have a positive experience of education.

**Question for discussion:** *What other things can you think of which might help different groups of people to get the most out of their education?*

**If you would like to find out any more information about this research, please contact:**

**Dr Stephanie Burns (Queen's University Belfast) at [stephanie.burns@qub.ac.uk](mailto:stephanie.burns@qub.ac.uk)**