

# Social inequalities in post-school transitions: continuity and change

Selina McCoy, Emer Smyth



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# Outline

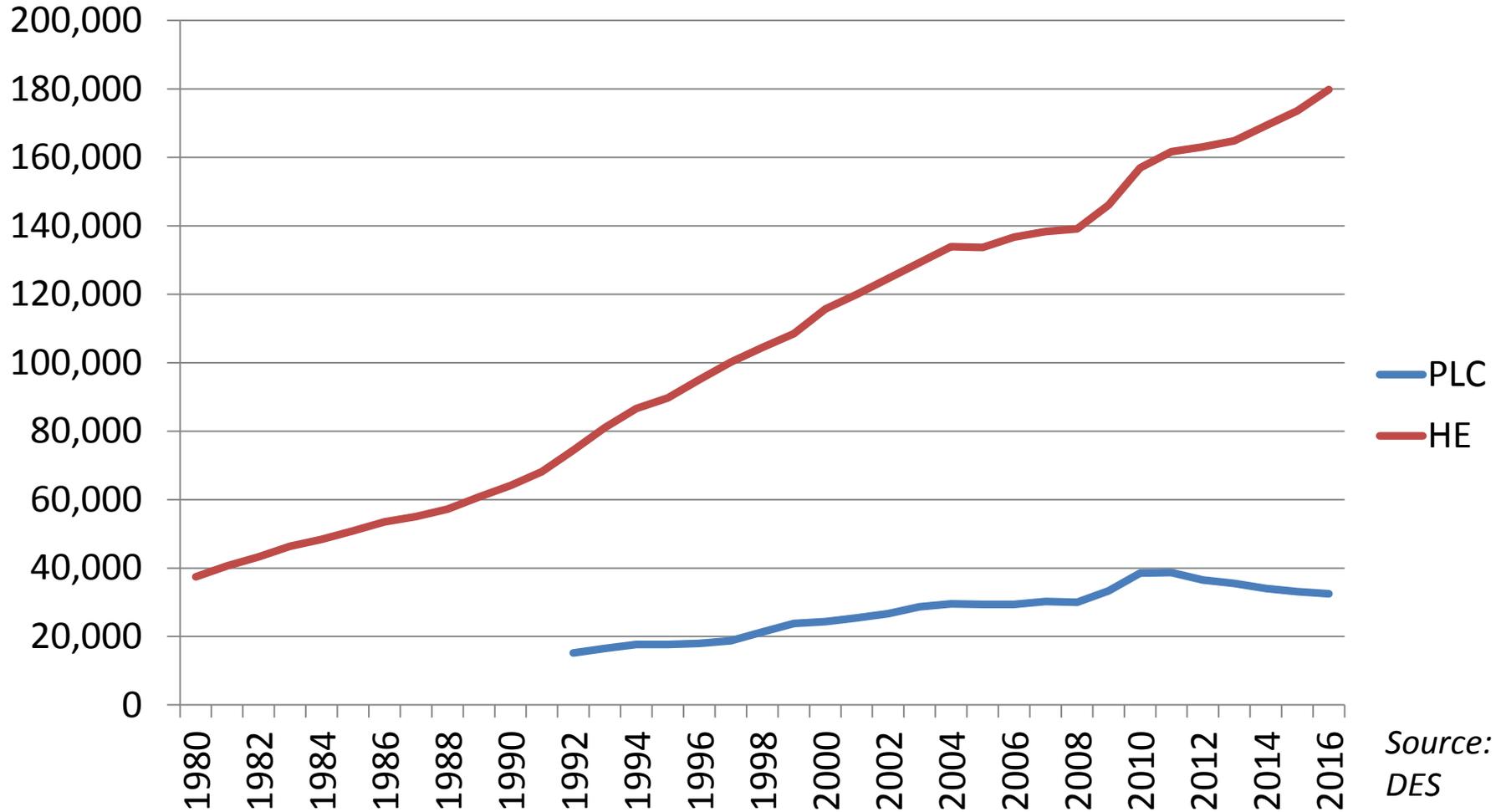


- Large body of ESRI research on post-school transitions based on a significant data infrastructure:
  - 25 years of School Leavers' Surveys
  - Follow-up surveys of school leavers
  - Leaving School in Ireland study
- Overview of key findings on post-school transitions
- Relevance for current policy debates and issues for further research

# Changing post-school landscape

- Significant increase in retention to Leaving Certificate level (now 90%)
- Expansion in Post-Leaving Certificate course places (school leaver and mature entrants)
- Cyclical response of apprenticeships and current restructuring
- Massive increase in third-level participation
- Smaller (and more disadvantaged) group of school leavers entering the labour market directly

# Expansion of PLC (VPT2) and HE places



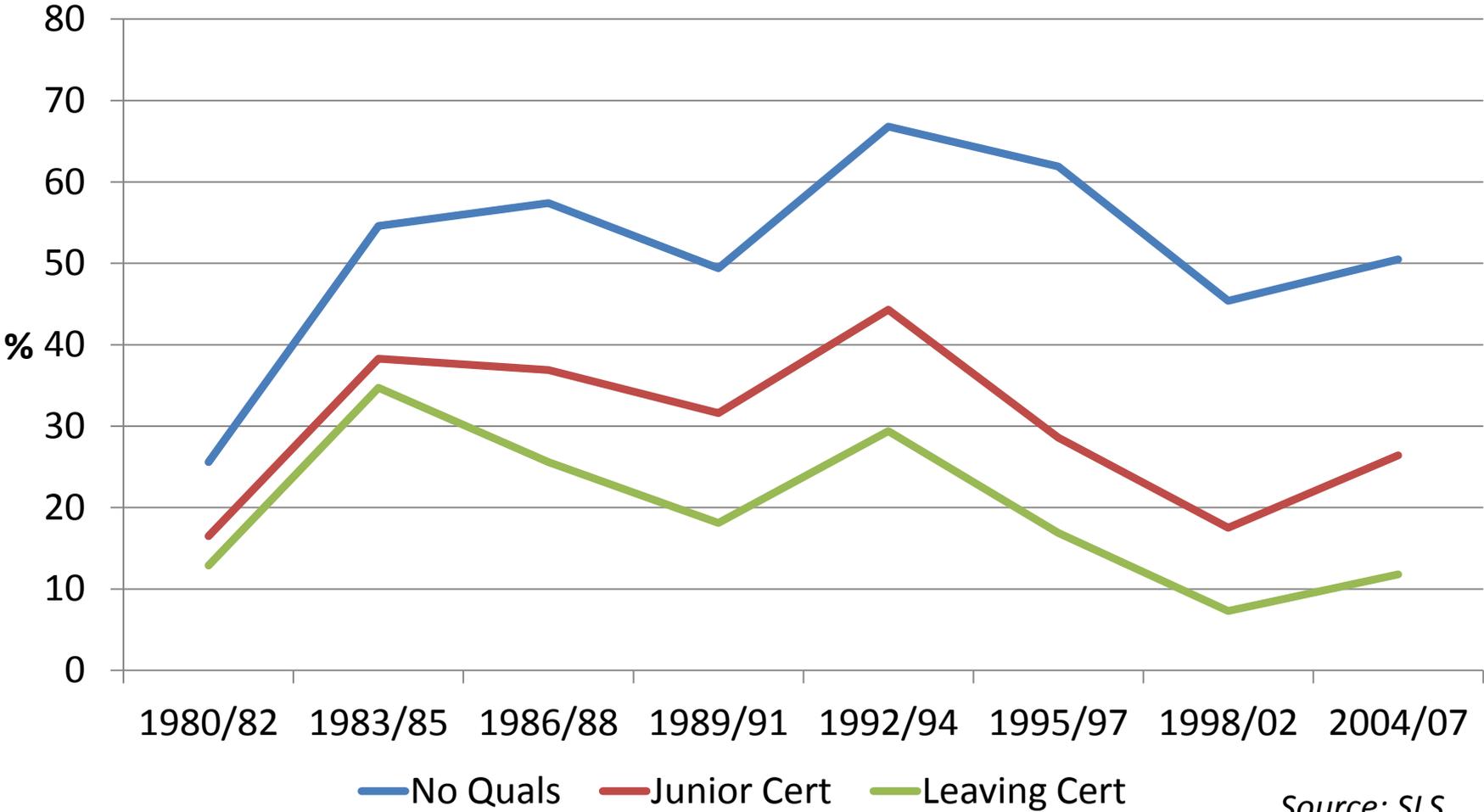
Source:  
DES

# How do second-level educational outcomes shape post-school transitions?



- Educational level:
  - Leaving Certificate qualifications (increasingly) a gateway to post-school education/training, acquiring a job and the quality of that employment
- Exam grades:
  - Obvious implications for HE entry
  - But also used by employers as a filter to (better quality) jobs
- Subject choice: not as important in Ireland as in other contexts (like Scotland) but related to field of study within HE

# Unemployment rate by educational level

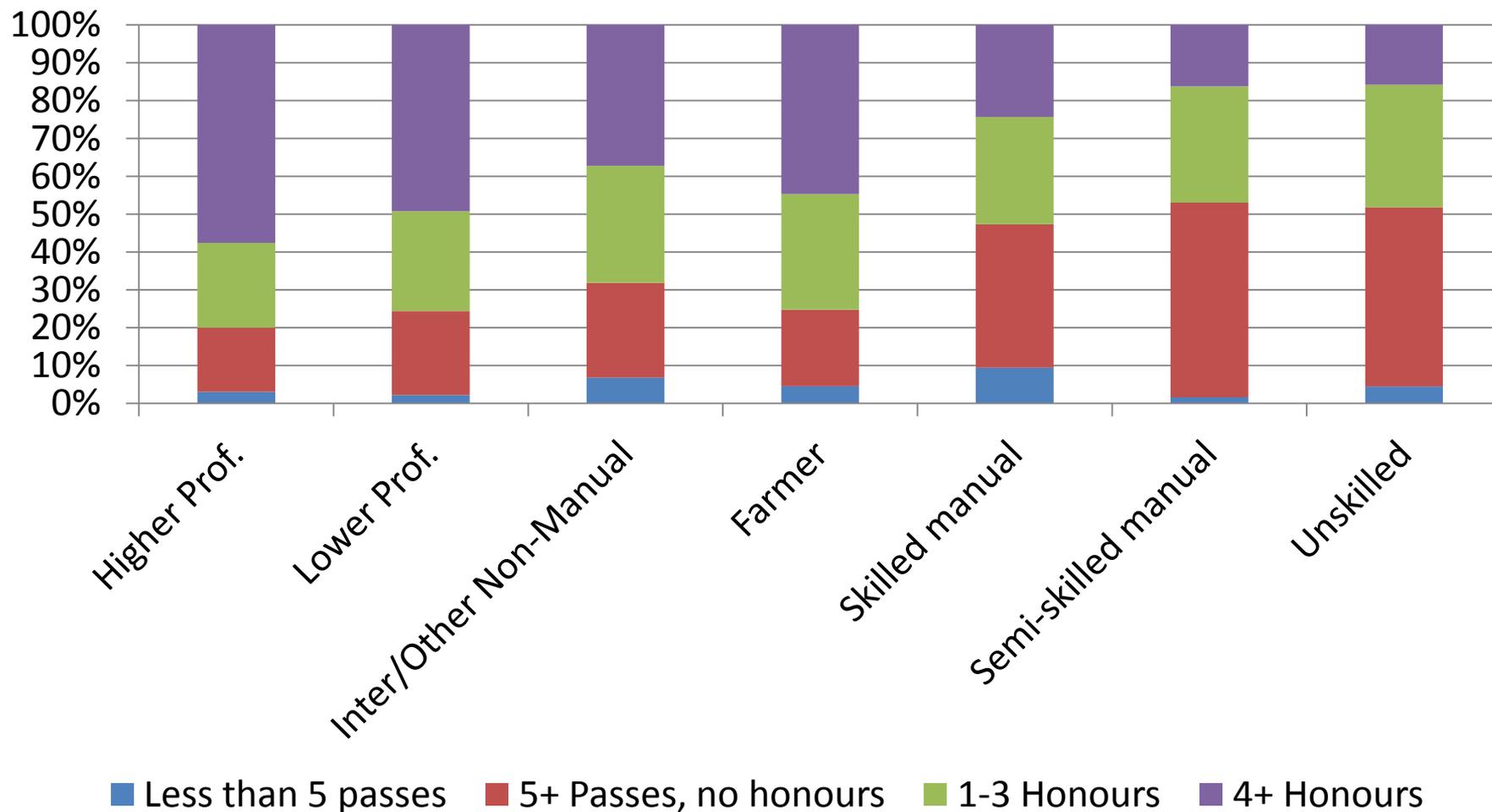


Source: SLS

## Social inequalities in post-school pathways

- Differentiation by social class and parental education in participation in further and higher education and in type of institution attended (university v. institute of technology)
- Pattern is largely driven by social class differences in performance at earlier stages of the educational career (and retention) and by school experiences (discussed later)
- Social class background has a direct effect on the chances of getting a job and the status of that job, even taking account of LC grades

# Social inequalities in Leaving Certificate performance 2006/7



Source: SLS

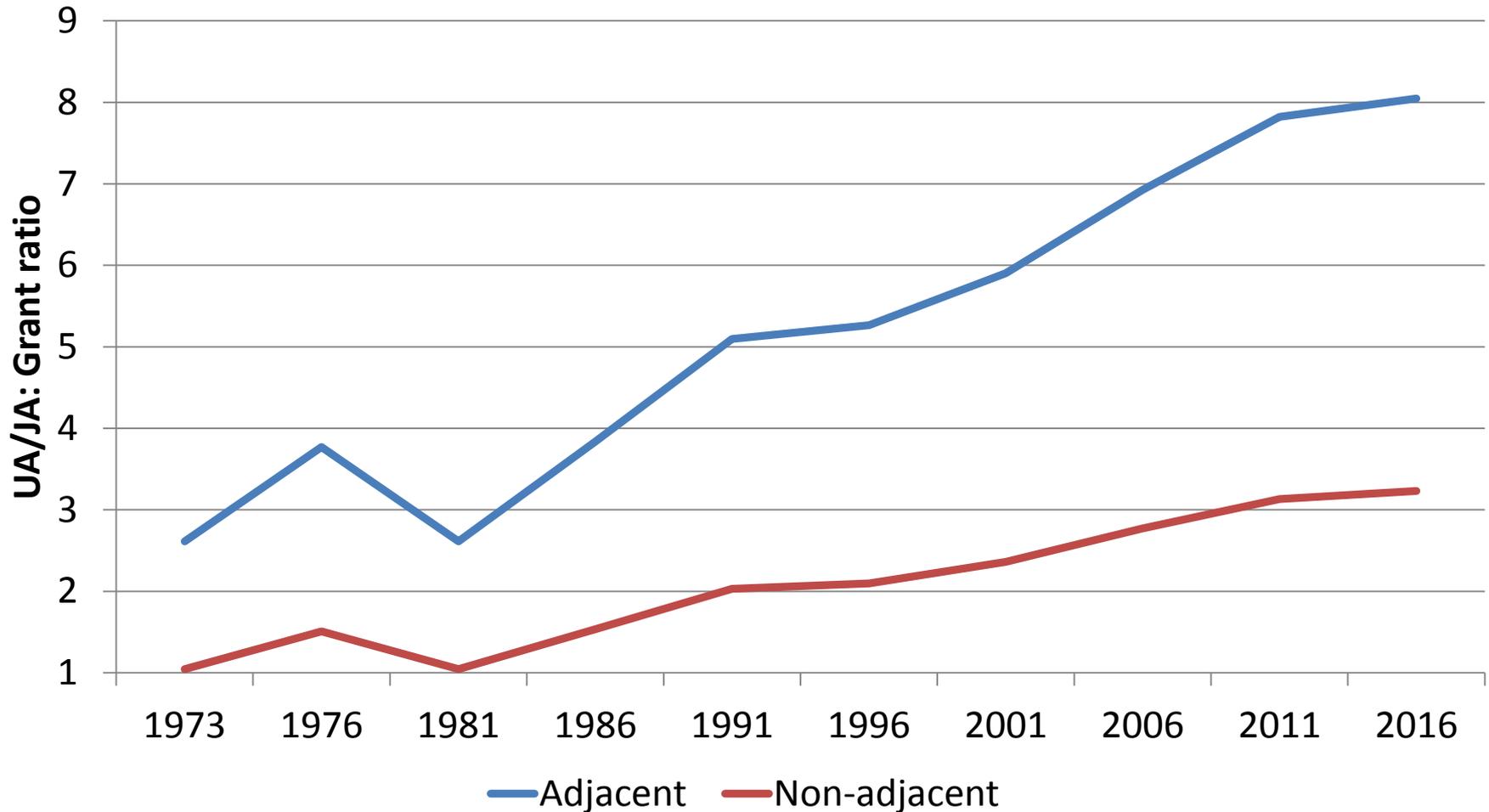
# Does money matter?

- Impact of educational expansion and ‘free fees’ initiative on social inequalities in HE provision
- Initial expansion – some widening of the gap for higher professional groups with subsequent narrowing due to near saturation
- Removal of fees – boost for farm families; no real narrowing of gap (esp. in university entry) for young people from working-class or lower service worker backgrounds because:
  - Diverted by employment opportunities in the boom
  - Persisting impact of direct costs of HE participation

## Does money matter? (2)

- Policy debate has largely centred on the issue of fees and loans but has neglected a discussion of other aspects of student support and their consequences for social inequality in participation
- The level of subsistence grants has fallen relative to other benchmarks
- Majority of students are dependent on (at least some) family support
- Financial issues emerge as a key concern among young people in their first year of further/higher education

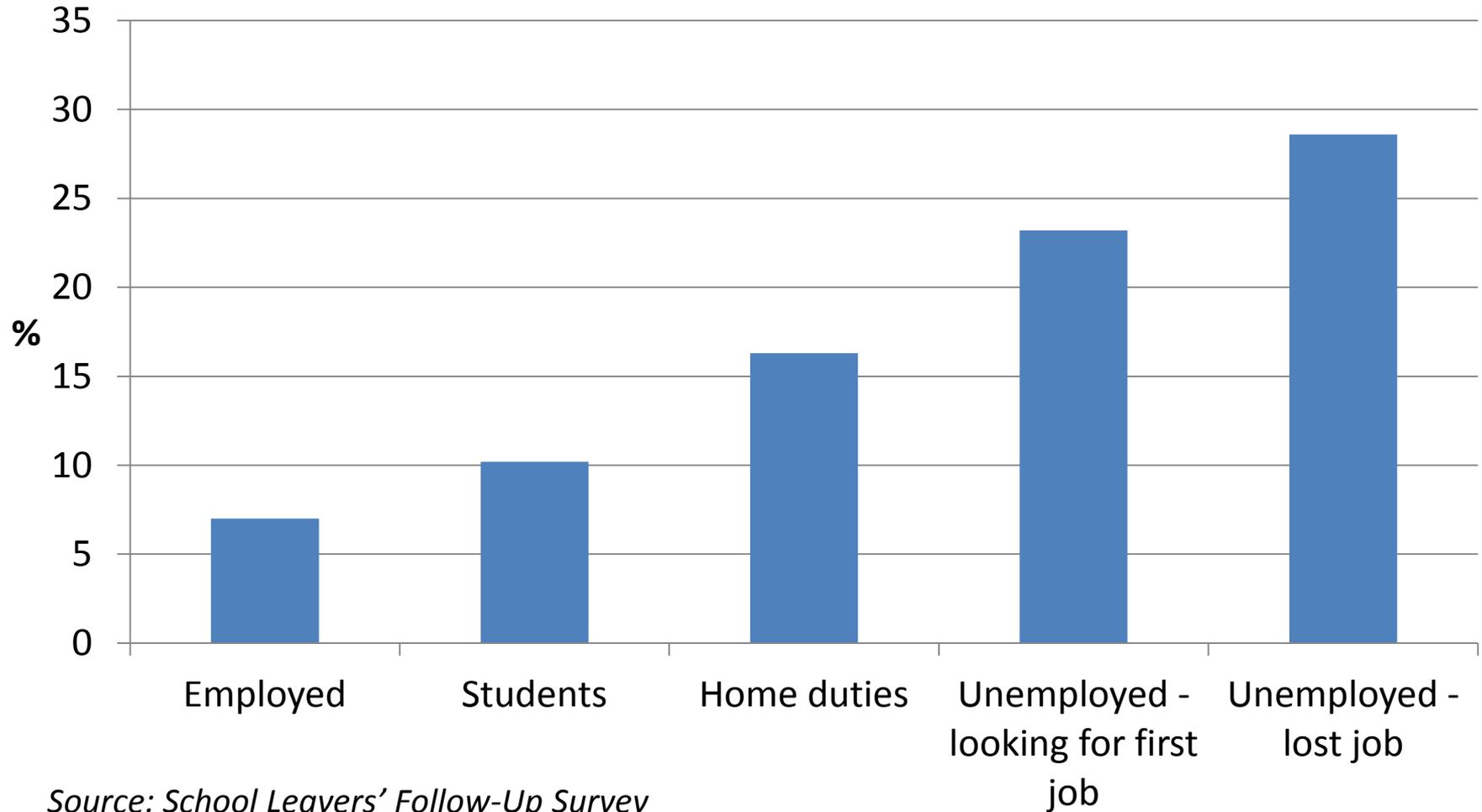
# Student maintenance grant levels v. means-tested unemployment payments



# Outcomes and experiences

- Survey and interview data have facilitated analysis not only of what happens to young people after they leave school but of how they feel about these experiences
- Aspects:
  - Socio-emotional wellbeing
  - Preparedness for life after school
  - Satisfaction/regret with pathway pursued

# Socio-emotional wellbeing (% with high psychological distress)

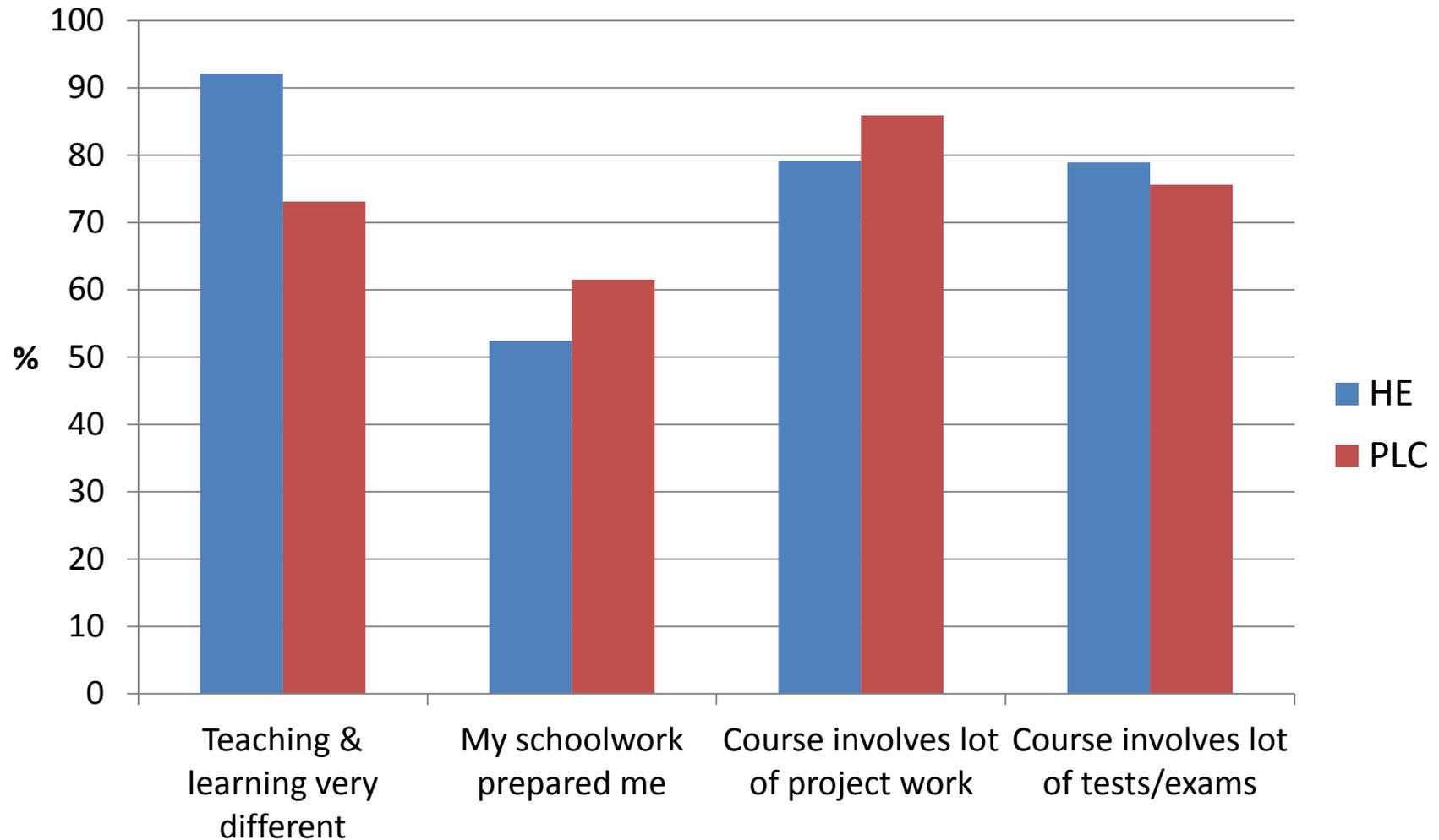


Source: *School Leavers' Follow-Up Survey*

# Preparedness for life after school

- Gaps in perceived benefits of education across social groups:
  - Preparation for the world of work
  - Preparation for adult life
- Mismatch in approach to teaching and learning in second-level and further/higher education

# Transition to further/higher education



Source: Leaving School in Ireland study

# Shift to self-directed learning

- Challenges of knowing what standard to expect and course difficulty; ‘dealing with deadlines’

In school you’re learning for an exam, in college you’re learning to think for yourself, it’s just completely different. I don’t think school really prepares you for it. (Sandra, Belmore Street, higher education)

There’s a lot of self-directed work compared to being in secondary school where you’ve got someone always behind you and saying, pushing you like ‘you know you have to do this, you’re in sixth year, your Leaving Cert is coming up’. (Fiona, Barrack Street, higher education)

# Regretting choices

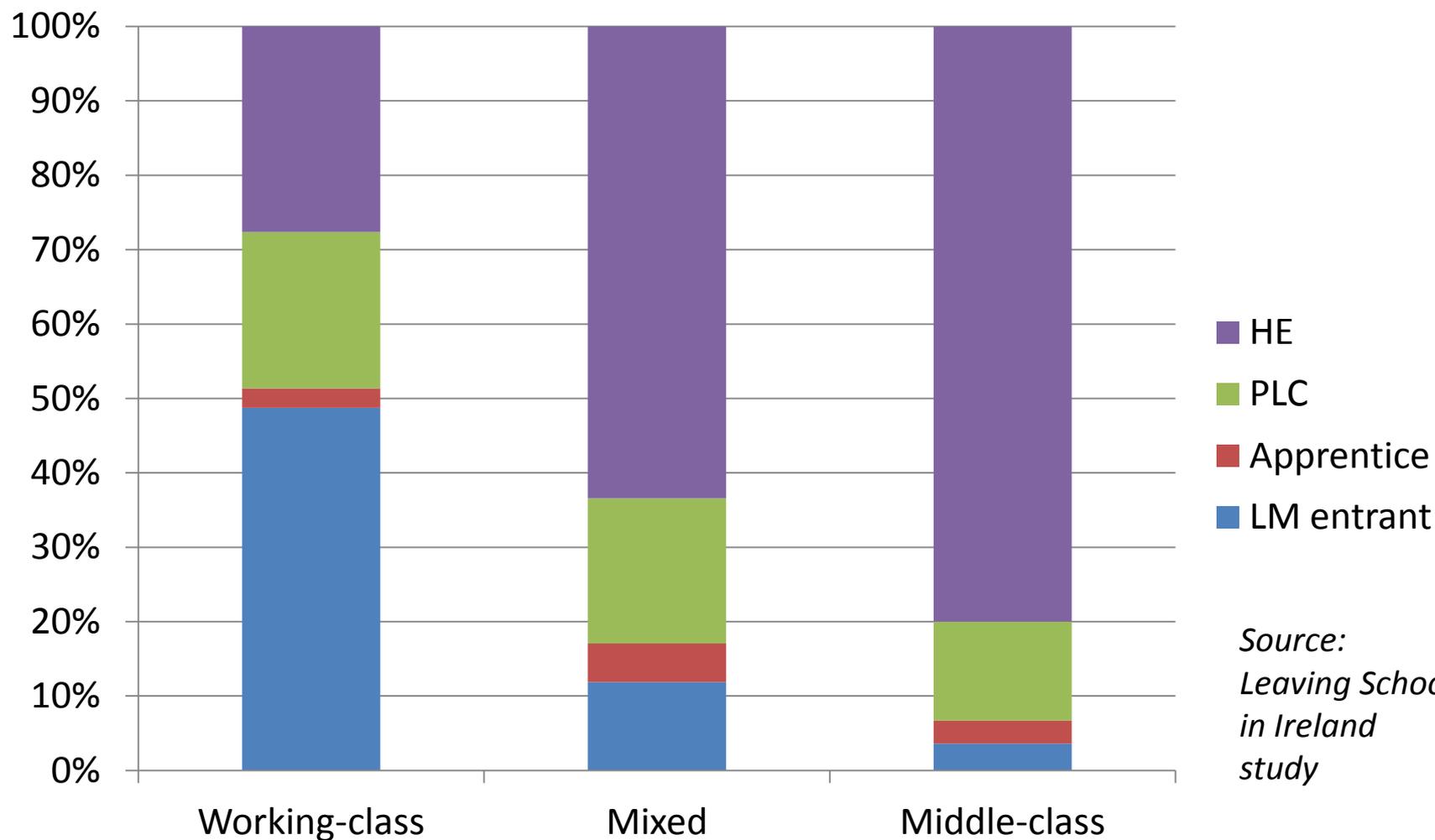
- Only 53% of young people would choose the same pathway again
- This reflects:
  - Not accessing their preferred course
  - Finding it difficult to find a job in the recession
  - Courses not being what they expected
- More prevalent for those with lower LC grades and those from working-class backgrounds
- Related to satisfaction with career guidance

# Emerging issues in explaining social inequalities in educational outcomes



- Growing awareness of the role of schools in shaping (inequalities in) post-school pathways:
  - Influence of the social mix of the school, over and above the effect of individual social background
  - Role of guidance (formal and informal) in shaping young people's decision-making

# School social mix and pathways



Source:  
*Leaving School  
in Ireland  
study*

# In what concrete ways does social mix influence the transition to FE and HE?



1. Ability grouping and access to higher level subjects → academic performance
2. School climate and student engagement
3. Guidance

# Ability grouping

- Streaming is more commonly used in schools serving a disadvantaged population
- Working-class students are more likely to be in streamed classes, esp. lower streams
- Greater disengagement, lower educational aspirations, higher drop-out and lower exam performance found among lower stream groups
- Even in mixed ability schools, there is differential access to higher level subjects across schools

# School climate

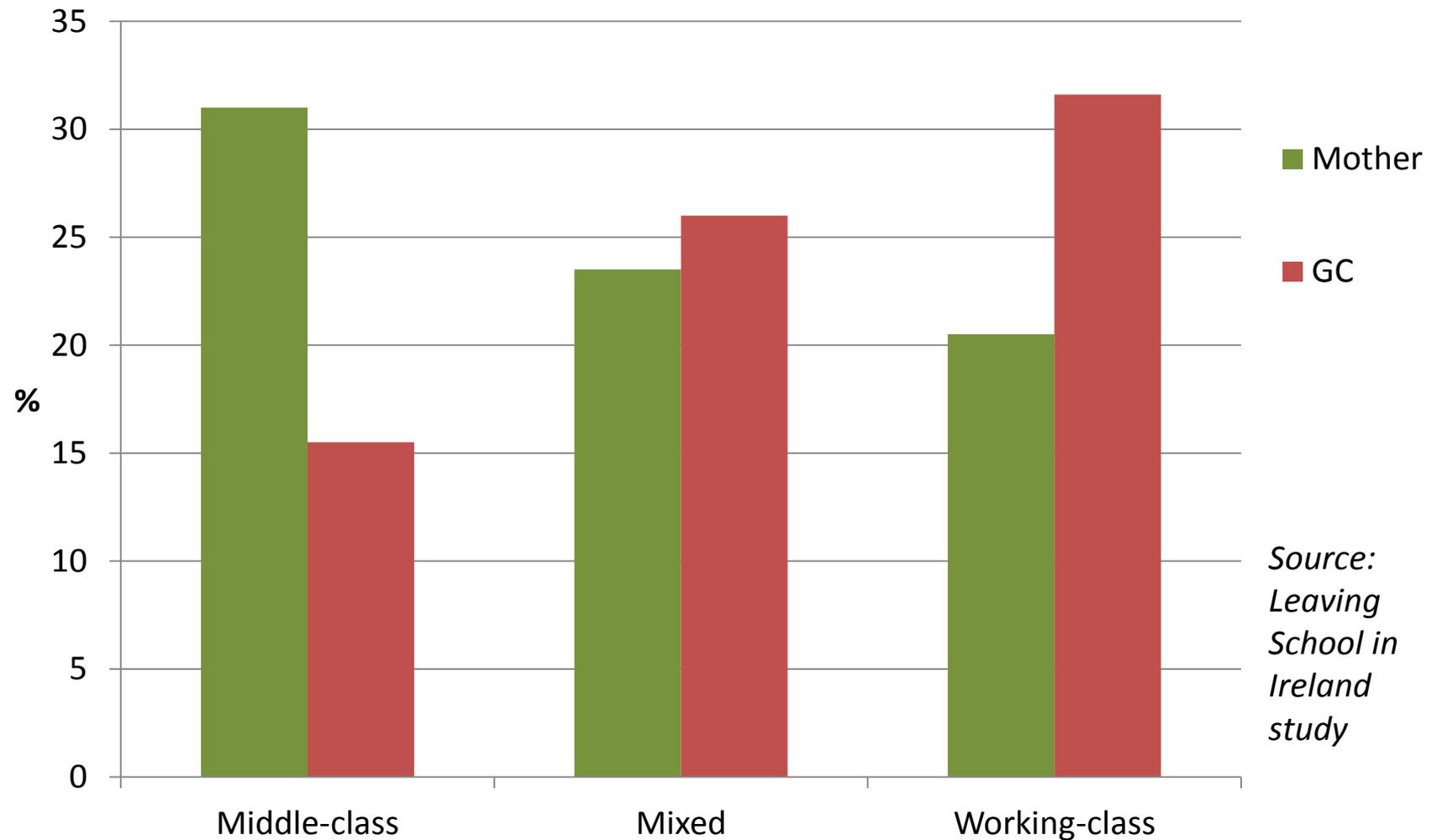
- Quality of relationship with teachers influences retention and exam performance
- School engagement is a key factor in post-school educational participation
- Negative interaction with teachers reduces entry to post-school education and training

*I looked at college and I just thought at the moment I couldn't take any more school like not even an ounce of school, but like it just wasn't for me. I didn't like anything about school, I wasn't good at it. (Rosemary, middle-class girls' school)*

# Guidance and decision-making

- Aspirations to higher education emerge as early as junior cycle – related to social background and school social mix
- Working-class young people are less likely to aspire to professional jobs and this gap grows larger by the end of second-level education
- Parents play a very important role in supporting choices throughout second-level education but vary in their ‘insider’ knowledge
- Guidance counsellors become more important at later stages of the school career, especially for working-class youth

# Most helpful advice by school social mix



*Source:  
Leaving  
School in  
Ireland  
study*

# School orientation to HE



*There was never really any question of anything else.  
Yeah, you're just missing out if you don't go to college.  
Yeah, you're kind of expected to go to college. (Middle-class fee-paying school)*

*Like for people who want to go onto college like they [are] just shoving PLC courses down your neck. Like there's nothing wrong with PLC courses and all but if you have your heart set on college like and someone's telling you PLC courses all the time and telling you that you won't get into college like. Actually saying you are not going to get into college, don't bother trying like or anything like. (Working-class girls' school)*

# Conclusions

- Large body of ESRI research on inequalities in post-school transitions – yields insights into issues of current policy relevance
- Strong evidence base on the role of schools in reinforcing (or countering) social inequalities in later outcomes
- Gaps in knowledge, especially about decision-making:
  - Potential to use GUI data to take a comprehensive approach to different aspects of the transition process
  - But need for on-going information on how (working-class) young people fare in a changing ET and LM landscape