

A North-South comparison of education and training systems: lessons for policy

DATE

28 April 2022

AUTHORS

Emer Smyth

Anne Devlin

Adele Bergin

Seamus McGuinness



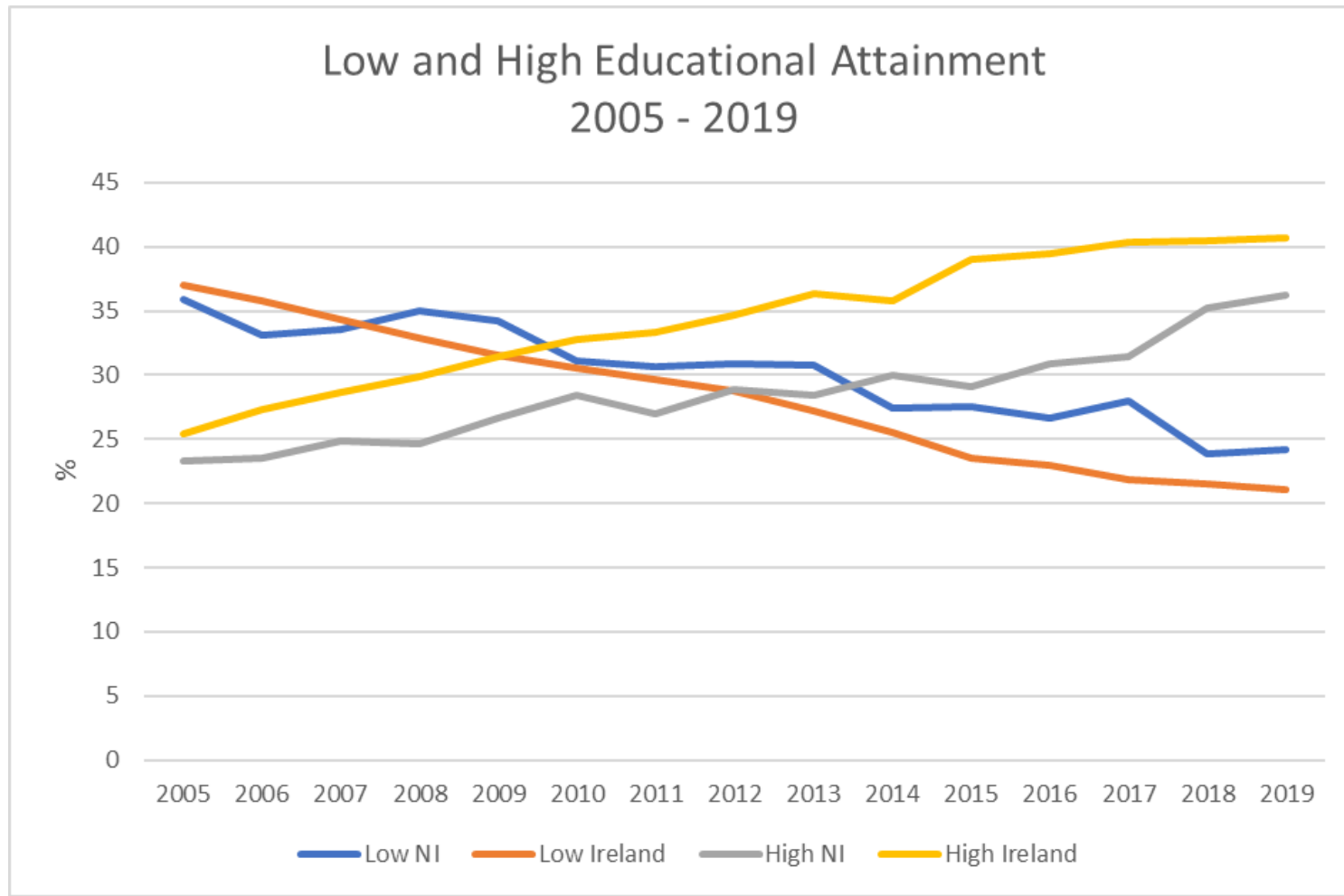
Acknowledgements

- Shared Island Unit
- Research programme steering group
- Tony Gallagher
- Stakeholders who gave their time generously for the interviews and consultation

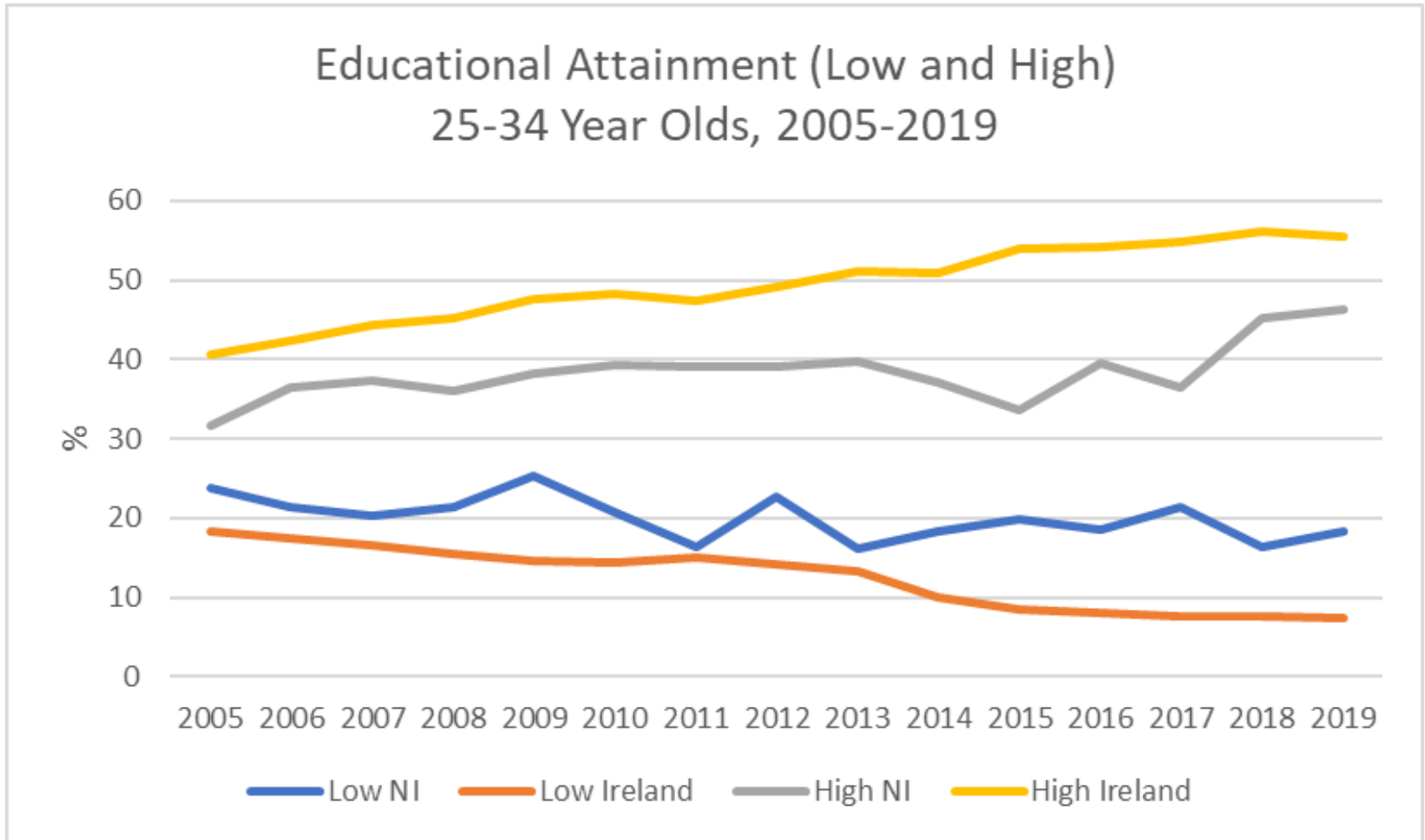
Outline of presentation

- Trends in educational attainment over time
- Skills development at primary and secondary levels
- Social disadvantage and educational attainment
- Returns to educational qualifications
- Differences and commonalities between the jurisdictions from stakeholder interviews and consultation
- Conclusions and policy implications

Educational Attainment Over Time (EU-LFS)

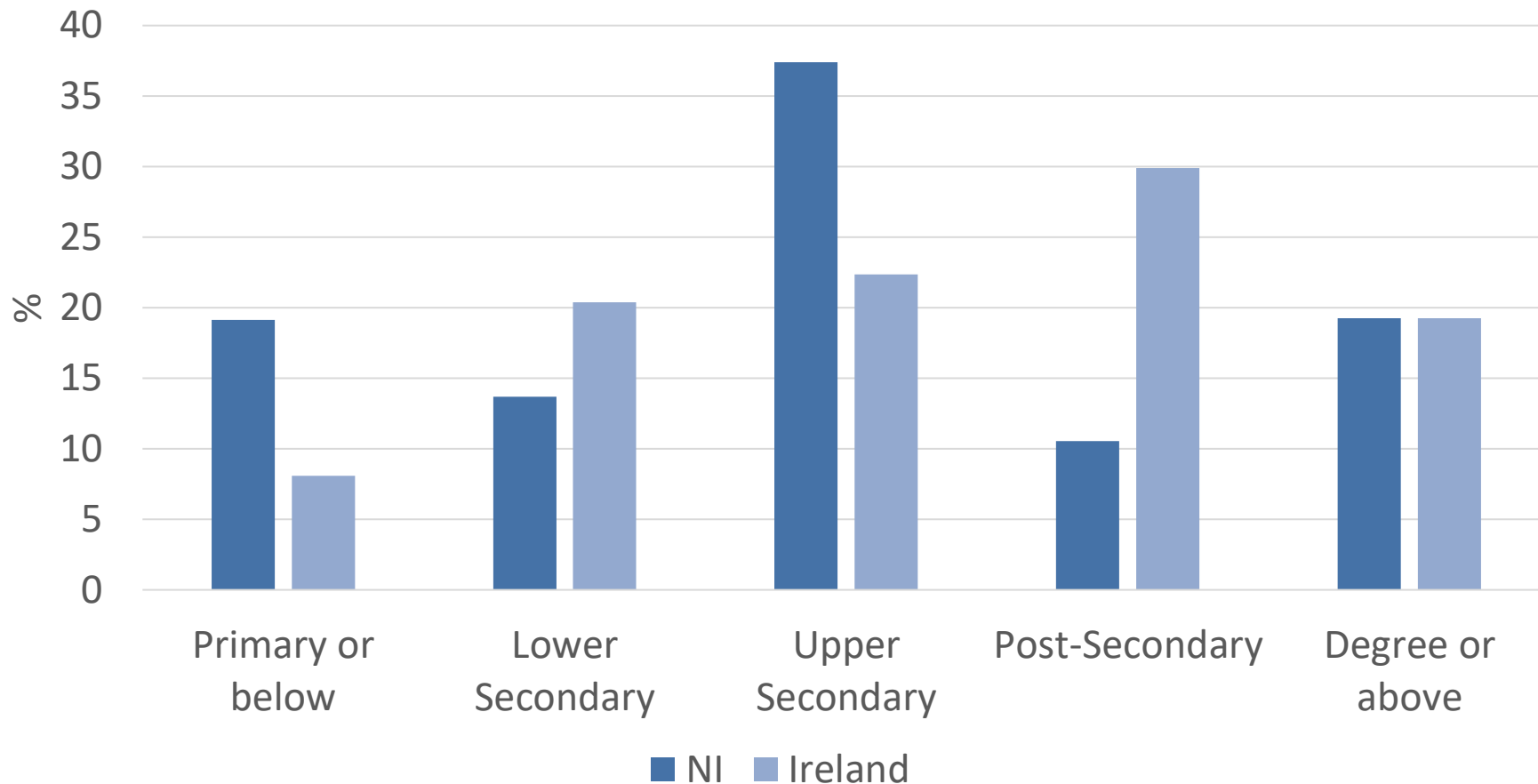


Educational Attainment Over Time (EU-LFS)



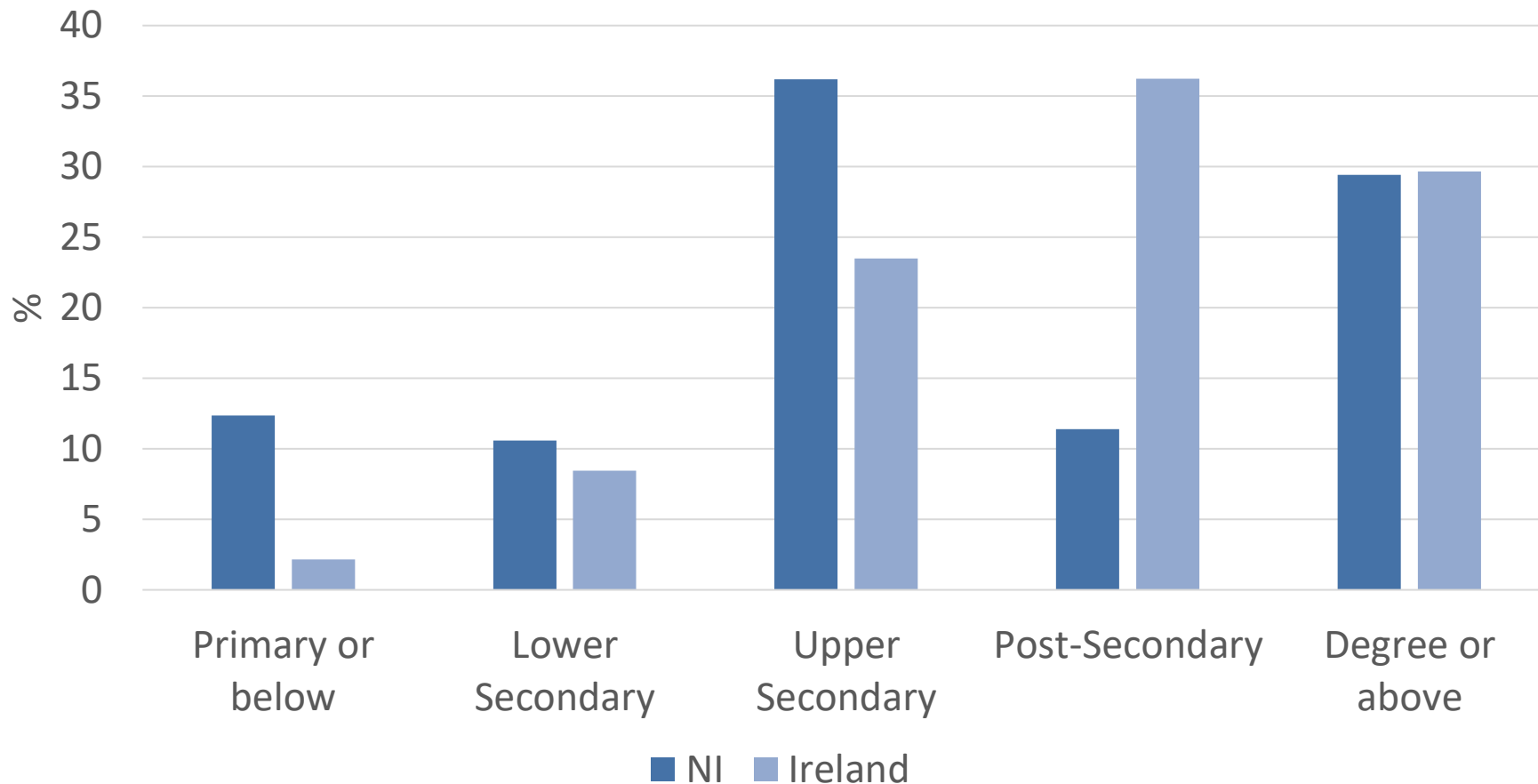
Educational Attainment (PIAAC 2014)

Educational Attainment, All Ages



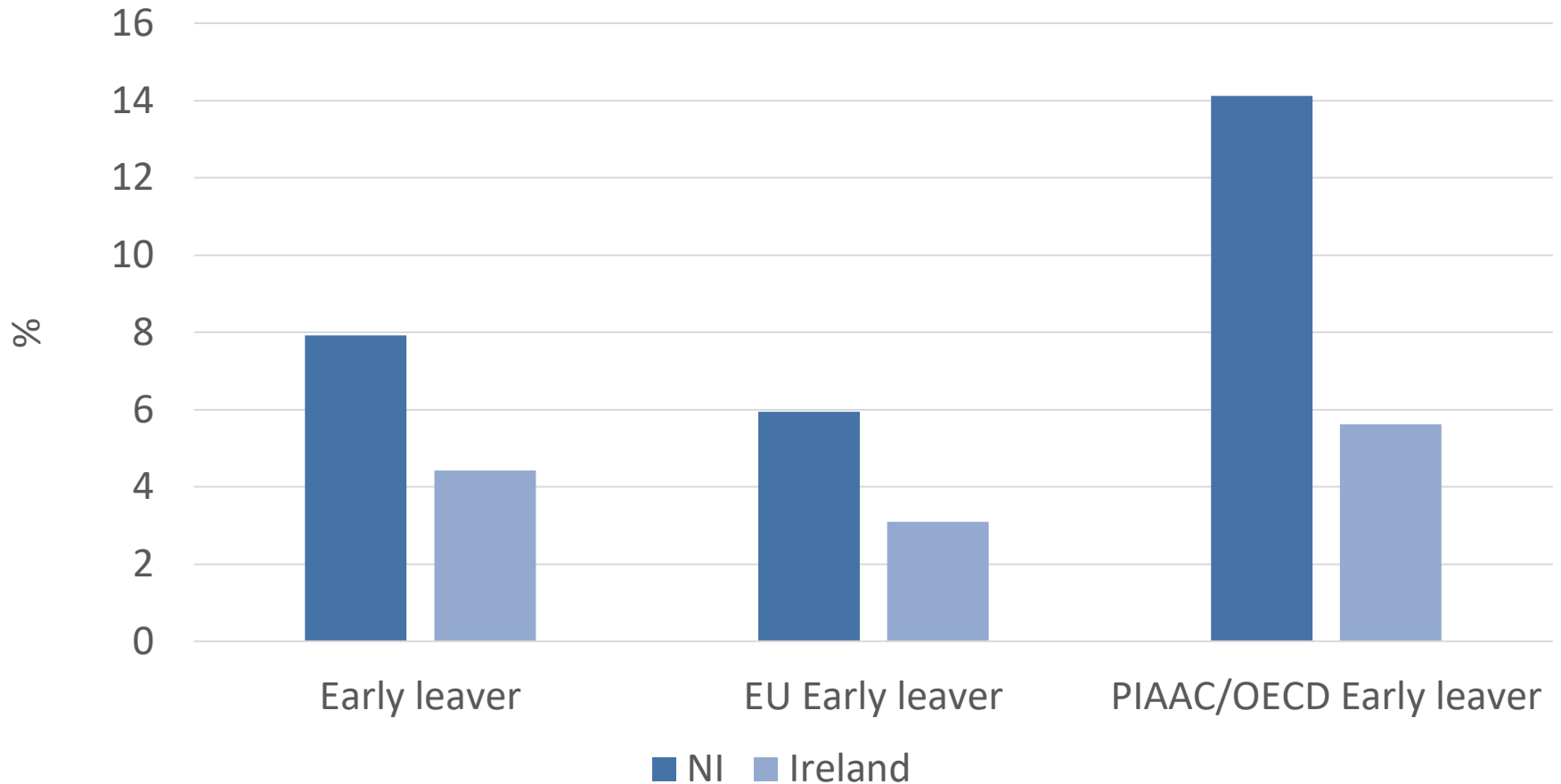
Educational Attainment (PIAAC 2014)

Educational Attainment, 25-29 Year Olds



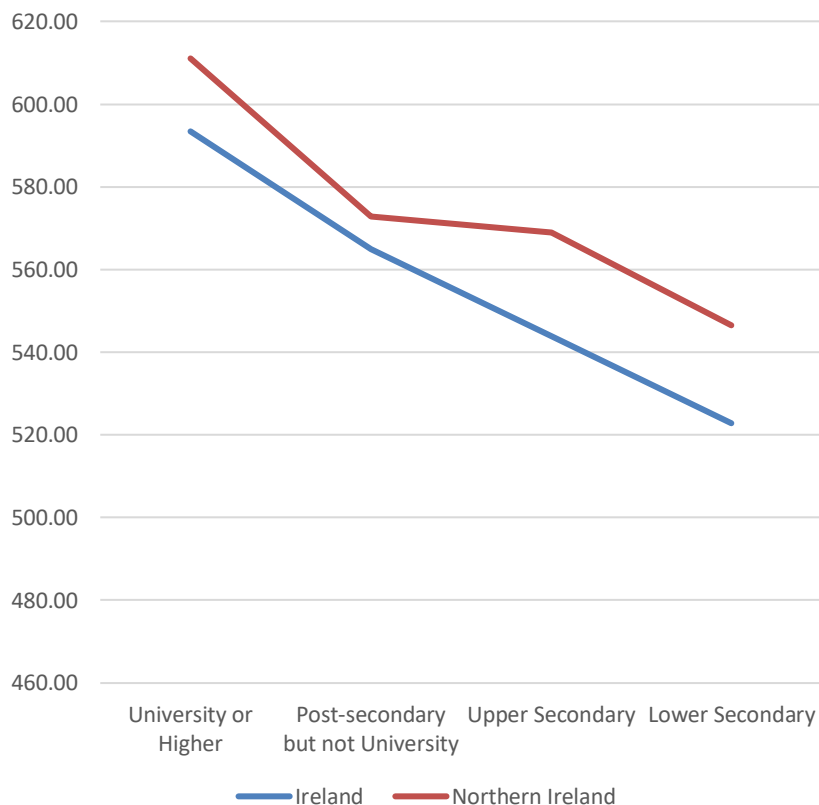
Early School Leaving (PIAAC 2014)

Early School Leaving

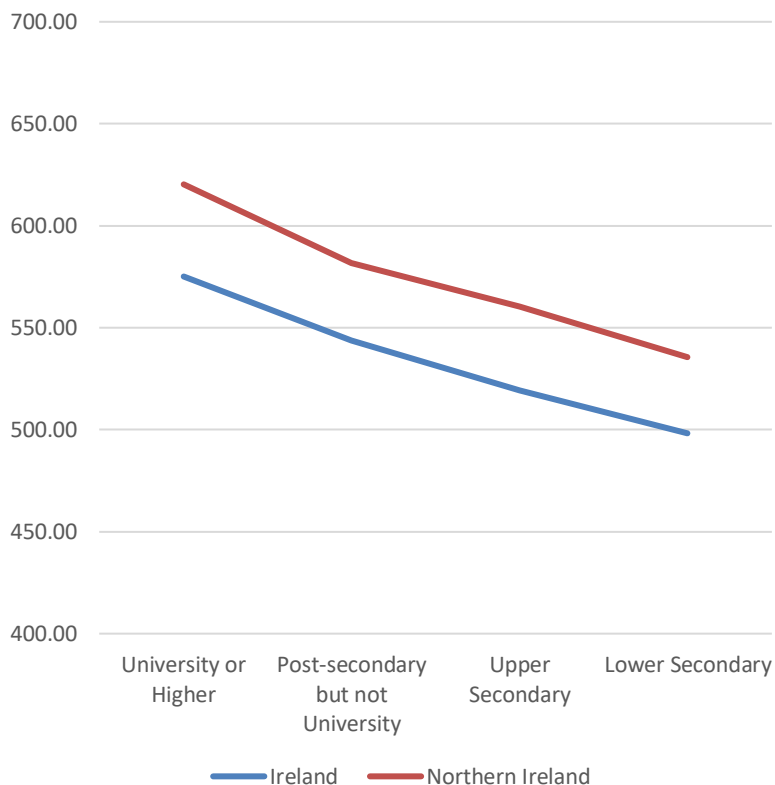


Skills at primary school level (PIRLS 2016, TIMSS 2019)

Reading

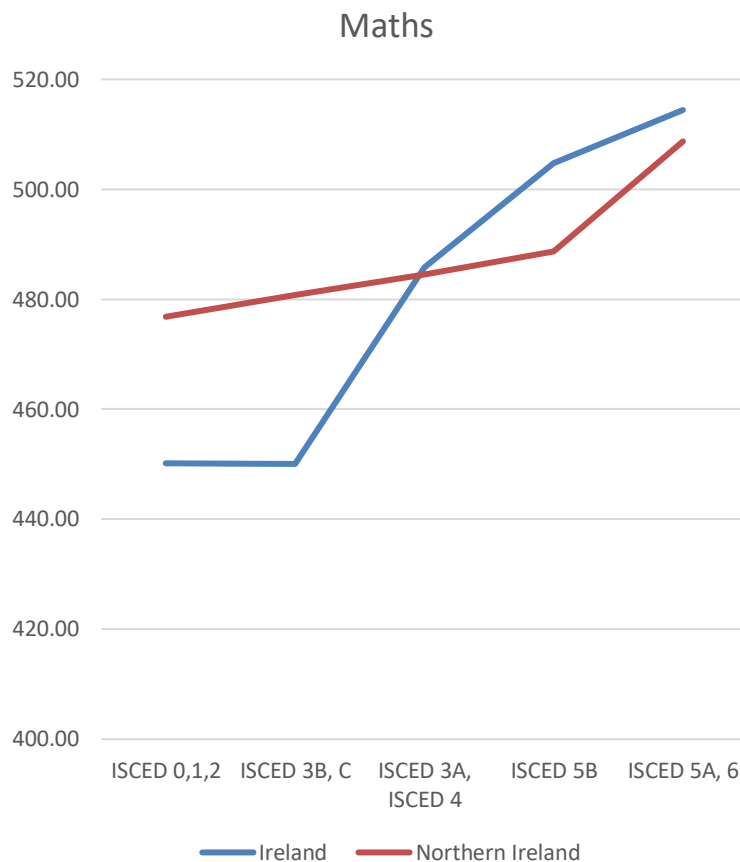


Maths



Both high-performing, NS difference; similar inequality levels by parental educational qualifications

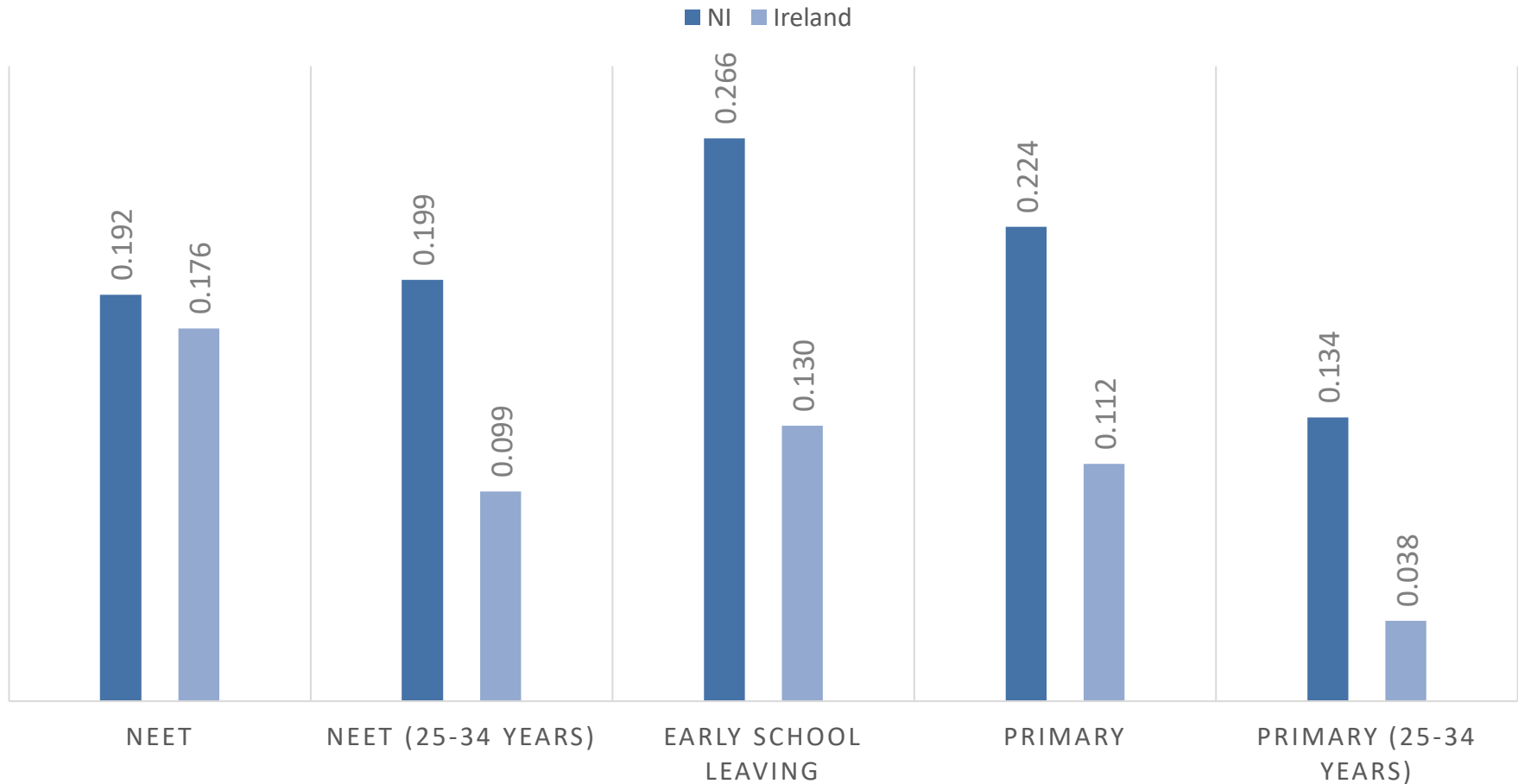
Skills at secondary level (PISA 2018)



Both high-performing, IR slightly higher; somewhat more differentiation by parental education in IR

Social Disadvantage and Educational Level (PIAAC 2014)

MARGINAL EFFECTS OF PARENTS HAVING LOW EDUCATION



Social disadvantage and exam performance

- Over and above education level, exam grades play a role in access to HE and also to employment
- In both systems, exam grades at lower and upper secondary levels differ by gender and disadvantage (FSM/exam fee waiver), with the lowest performance among disadvantaged males
- But relative gap is larger and relationship between school-level disadvantage and average upper secondary exam performance is stronger in IR than in NI
- NI – greater differentiation by level; IR – higher retention to upper secondary but more differentiation within level by grades

Social background and educational expectations (PISA)

- Expectations to go to HE vary by maternal education in both settings
- However, expectations are significantly lower in NI than IR even after controlling for parental education
- This pattern is due to the much lower expectations among those in non-grammar schools, especially males
- Expectations in grammar schools in NI are no higher than those in voluntary secondary schools in IR

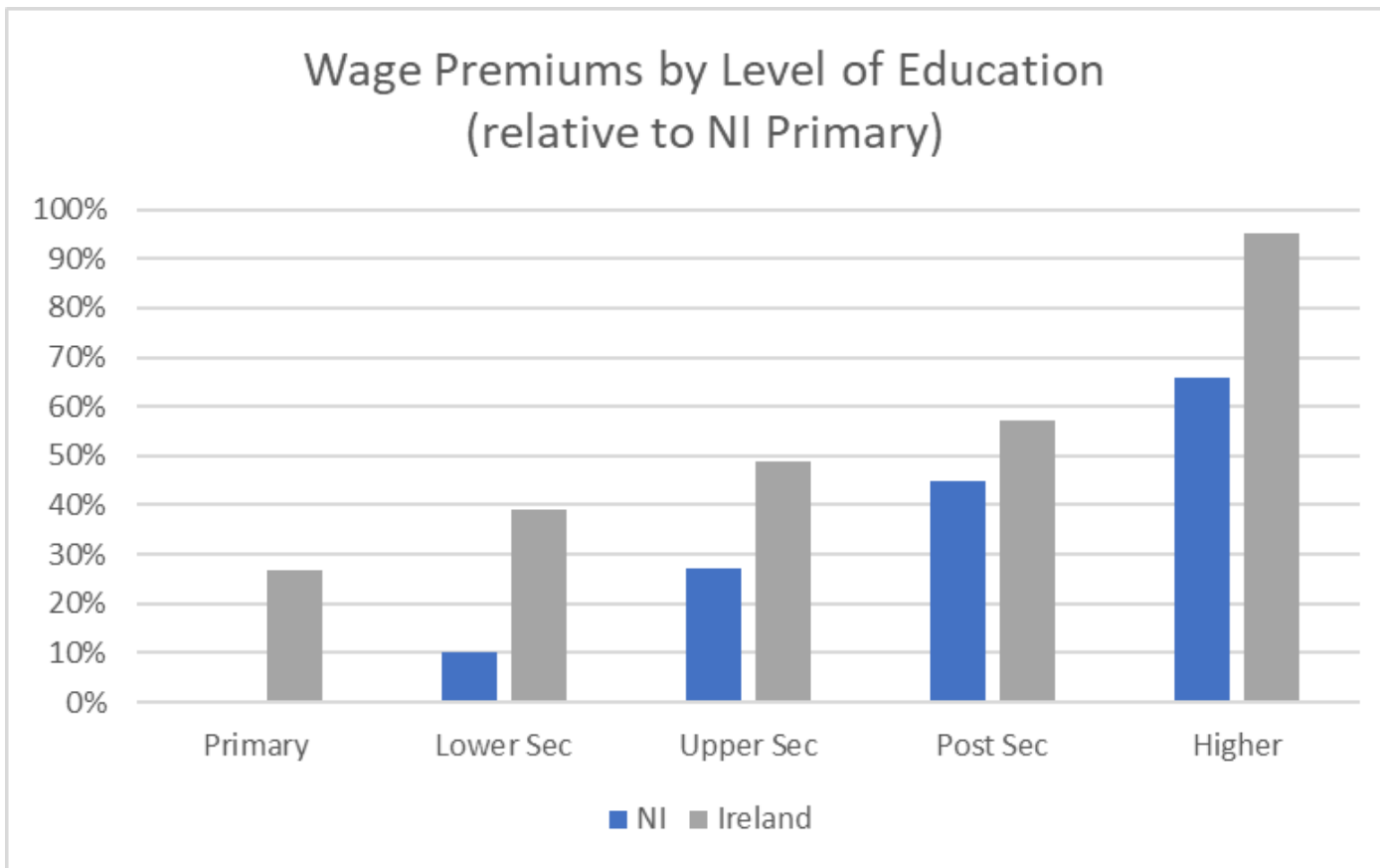
Returns to Education (PIAAC 2014)

| | Hourly wages PPP corrected | |
|--------------------|----------------------------|------------|
| | NI | Ireland |
| Experience | 0.037 *** | 0.044 *** |
| Experience Squared | -0.001 *** | -0.001 *** |
| Primary | 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 | 2005 | 2769 |
| R2 | 0.370 | 0.340 |

Note: Wage data adjusted for Ireland and UK prices (PPP corrected) in the PIAAC dataset using OECD methodology.

Further adjustment then carried out to account for NI prices being lower than the UK average.

Returns to Education (PIAAC 2014)



Returns to Education (PIAAC 2014)

| | NI | Ireland | Within category percentage point difference |
|------------------|---------------------------|------------|---|
| Primary | Reference Category | 27% | 27*** |
| Lower Sec | 10% | 39% | 29*** |
| Upper Sec | 27% | 49% | 22*** |
| Post Sec | 45% | 57% | 12*** |
| Higher | 66% | 95% | 29*** |

Commonalities:

- Both broadly positive about primary level – curriculum and skill development
- Both have challenges re small schools
- Governance – diverse school types with implications for funding and organisation
- Funding was raised as an issue in both jurisdictions

We have lower levels of funding per pupil compared to other parts of the UK ... 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. (Stakeholder, NI)

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)

Primary and secondary levels (2)

- Shift in focus at secondary level and backwash of high-stakes exams

We have a very, you know, strong ... skills and knowledge mixture based curriculum. Very forward thinking and all of that right through primary school key stage three. 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 and, you know, it doesn't really assess the skills that we need for the 21st century. (NI)

A high stakes exam ... spoon fed, drip fed, 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 covered in the curriculum for the purpose of passing the bloody exam. If you had a less pressured system, there should be more room you would think for developing the rounded individual that business and the world of work says it wants. (NI)

Within the second-level system as a whole, we're still grappling with the notion of teaching competencies and developing and fostering competencies rather than blocks of knowledge... we are very good at transferring blocks of knowledge but integrating the teaching and learning of skills really thoroughly is still a challenge and assessing them is a far more challenging task. (IE)

Primary-secondary (3)

- Differing approaches to educational disadvantage: extra funding v. integrated supports and funding

By throwing money at something through a formula. ... when you don't track what the money actually is used for ... in 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. (NI)

It also was good that we didn't address it 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, 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. (IE)

- Working-class groups as target group in both settings
- Impact of pandemic in both systems

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 like they're just so important to children's lives so poor children did worse. (NI)

Secondary (4)

Differences:

- **Academic selection v. school choice**

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. (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. (NI)

- **Lack of vocational options in schools (IR) v. overlapping provision for 14-19s (NI)**

We need to look at the vocational qualifications space because it's very crowded and confusing. And we need to ensure that pathways ... do have ladders and bridges so that you can go forwards and backwards, sideways to change careers, upskill, reskill that is, but we need to make sure that it's flexible. (NI)

You should be making sure there's different pathways rather than you know duplicating the same courses and in particular areas. (NI)

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 work 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. (IE)

Further education

Commonalities:

- Perceived lower status re HE and implications for intake

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, 'cause every parent aspires for their young person to go to university, if it's at all possible. (NI)

The main policy issue is still trying to raise the awareness of the viability and value of VET 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. (IE)

- Developments re apprenticeships and traineeships

Differences:

- School-FE links

We're trying to make sure that 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 and some of the area learning communities which would include both schools and FE colleges and we have all the schools grouped into those. The post primary schools grouped into those and that can help to ensure that children are given the better provision. (NI)

- FE-LM links: variation within and between systems

Higher education

- High return to HE qualifications in both systems
- New developments re technical universities

An objective of the technical 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. (IE)

- Variable FE-HE links within/between systems

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 a more simplified pathways within VET and more recognisable pathways to HE. ... VET HE transitions are currently too dependent on relationships between IoTs and individual colleges. (IE)

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. (NI)

- Differences re geographical mobility – implications for LM entry

North-South links

- Stakeholders highlighted a few examples of good practice:
 - SCOTENS
 - Inspectorate

SCOTENS had a model of bringing together in a non threatening way all the practitioners in a particular area in nine education, the teachers, the College of Education, the education administrators, the department that 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. (NI)

- But links were seen as often ad hoc, based on individuals or specific initiatives/projects

My impression is that the really exciting period in cross border educational cooperation was the 1st 10 years of the century when there was a lot of EU funding for North South educational cooperation projects. Now I think we've gone downwards and backwards. (NI)

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, the either Erasmus project or a North South Peace 2 project. (IE)

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. (NI)

Other than for the Northwest, where there is really significant engagement, co-operation is very segmented. (IE)

North-South links (2)

- Perceived scope for cooperation on more substantive issues

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. (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 10 miles away? ... Are there more efficient ways that we can deliver resources and help each other out? (NI)

Conclusions (1)

- Lower educational attainment in NI relative to Ireland
- Much higher rates of early school leaving in NI; improvement in IE due to DEIS have not been mirrored; concerning given the long-term impacts for individuals
- Differences in qualifications despite very similar skill levels in NI and Ireland at school-going ages; High skills levels in both on an international level
- Social disadvantage is a predictor of educational attainment in both jurisdictions
- But it is reflected in early leaving in Northern Ireland and greater grade inequality in Ireland, particularly at upper secondary level

Conclusions (2)

- Stakeholders highlight similarities and differences between the two systems
- Concerns were raised in both jurisdictions about how well the education system prepares young people for the labour market and for adult life
- In both systems, ‘high-stakes’ exams are seen as limiting young people’s skill development
- Potential for learning from other systems - The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS, programme was spoken highly of by stakeholders in Ireland as well as in Northern Ireland, mostly due to the targeted nature of the supports it provided

Policy Implications

- Stakeholders highlight the potential for increased cross-border collaboration
- ‘Top-down’ mandates unlikely to be successful - structure and frameworks that facilitate co-operation around areas of mutual interest
- Common challenges and potential for mutual learning around tackling educational disadvantage and ensuring the full inclusion of students with special educational needs