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SES gradients in higher education completion

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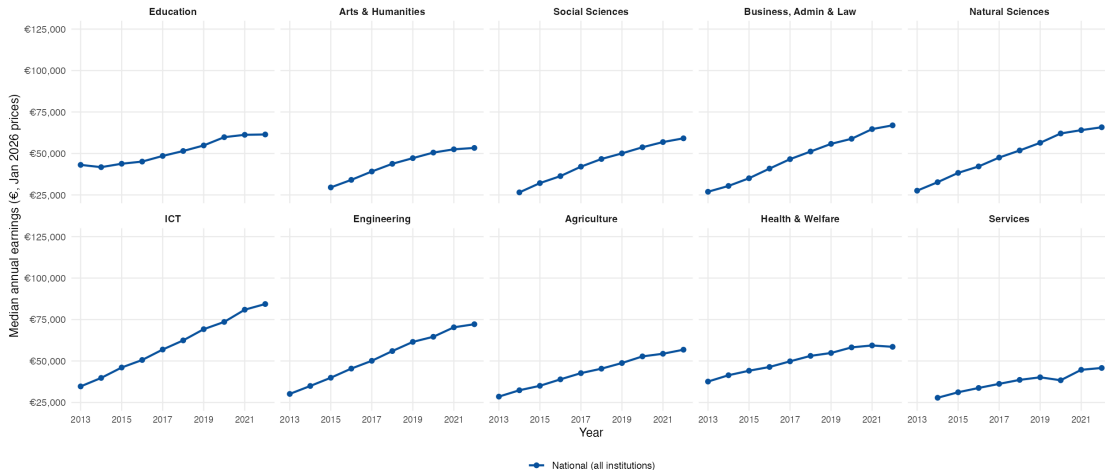
DFHERIS Conference, 25 June 2026

This presentation contains authors' analysis of data from Growing Up in Ireland (GUI), which is funded by the Government of Ireland. GUI is managed as a partnership between the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE) and the Central Statistics Office (CSO). The CSO are responsible for the survey element of GUI. Results in this report are based on analyses of data from Research Microdata Files provided by the CSO. Neither the CSO nor DCDE take any responsibility for the views expressed or the outputs generated from these analyses.

Earnings for Irish graduates vary a lot depending on what they study

Median (P50) graduate earnings, 2012 graduation cohort — national

NFQ Level 8, all genders · all HEA-funded institutions · CSO HEO12 · January 2026 prices

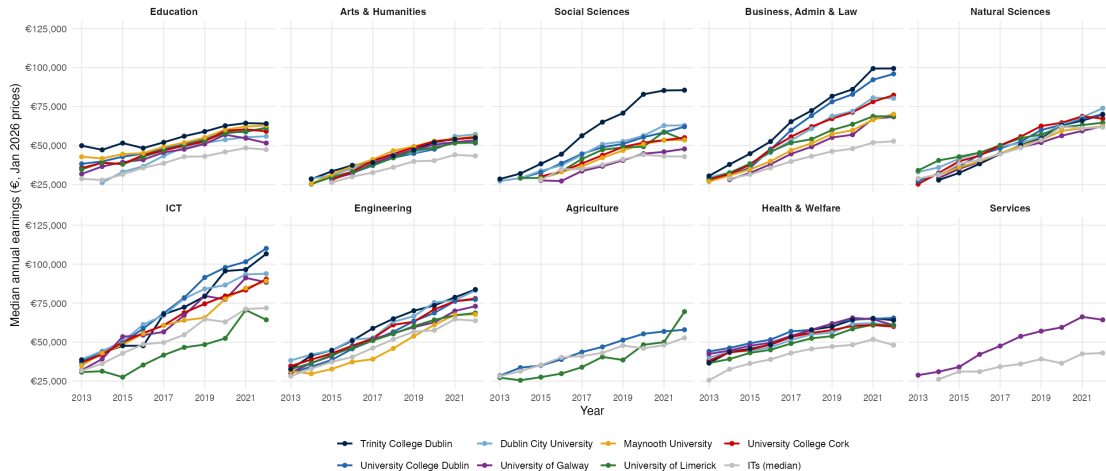


Source: CSO Graduate Earnings (HEO12) and Consumer Price Index (CPM02), accessed March 2026.
Weekly earnings annualised (x52), deflated using annual average CPI (Dec 2016 = 100); 2026 reference = January 2026.
Cells suppressed by CSO excluded.

... as well as where they study it

Median (P50) graduate earnings, 2012 graduation cohort

NFQ Level 8 · Irish universities · CSO HEO16 · January 2026 prices

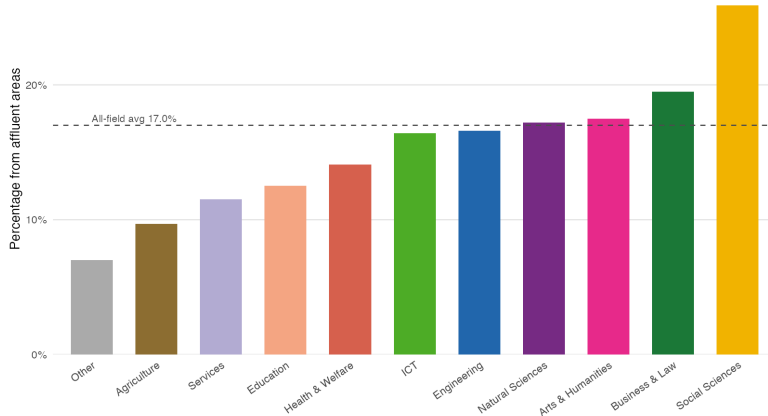


Source: CSO Graduate Earnings by Institution (HEO16) and Consumer Price Index (CPM02), accessed March 2026.
Weekly earnings annualised (x52), deflated using annual average CPI (Dec 2016 = 100), 2026 reference = January 2026.
Cells suppressed by CSO excluded.

But there are also substantial SES gradients in what students study

New entrants from affluent areas by field of study

2019/2020 new entrants to HEA-funded institutions · HEA National Access Plan 2022–2028



Source: HEA National Access Plan 2022–2028, Table A13. SES based on Pobal HP Deprivation Index.

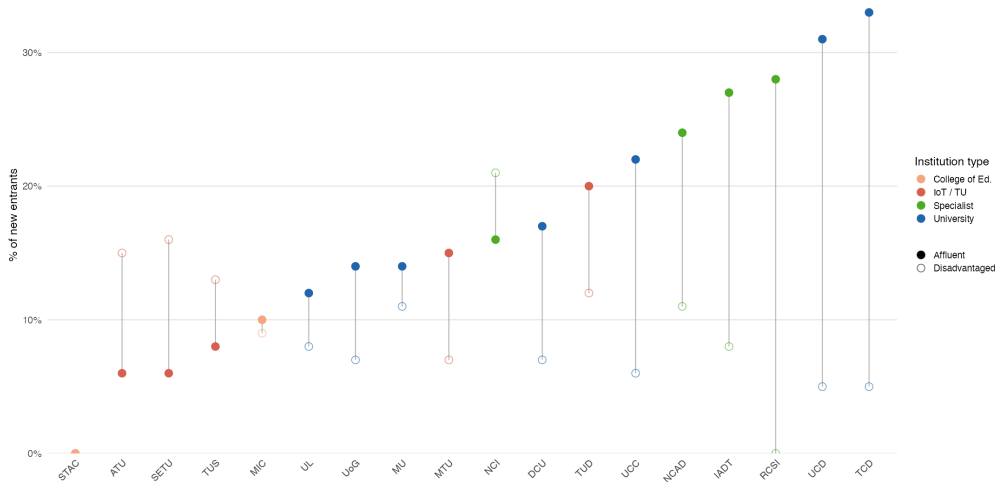
[Share affluent by sub-field →](#)

[Share disadvantaged by sub-field →](#)

... where they study

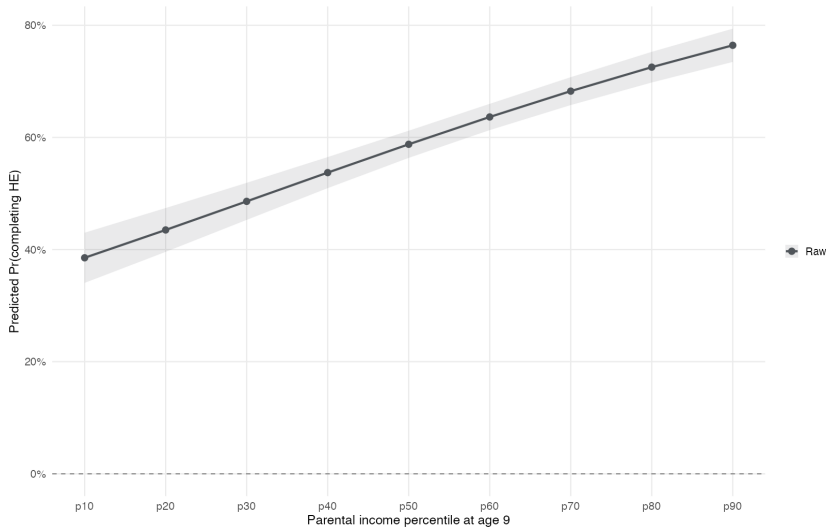
Share of new undergrad entrants from affluent and disadvantaged areas

2023/24 academic year · HEA-funded institutions · ordered by share affluent



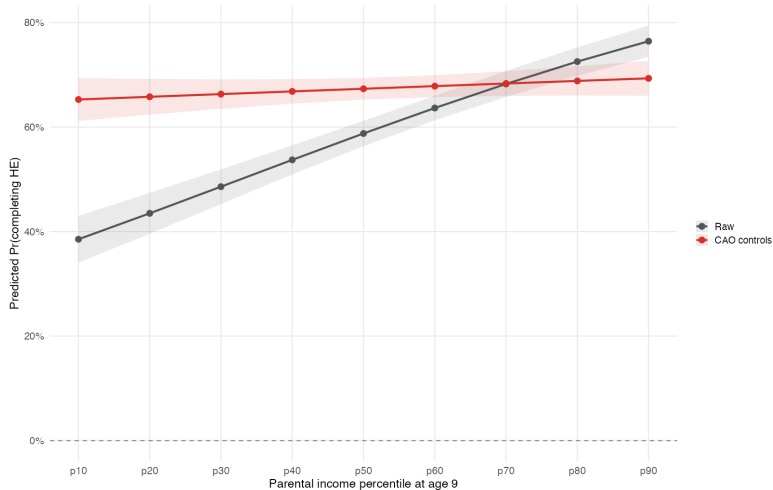
Source: HEA DIS Groups by Institute (Tableau Public), 2023/24.
DIS = Deprivation Index Score. Affluent: top DIS quartile. Disadvantaged: bottom DIS quartile.
Institutions ordered left to right by share of students from affluent areas.

... and whether they attain a higher education qualification by age 25



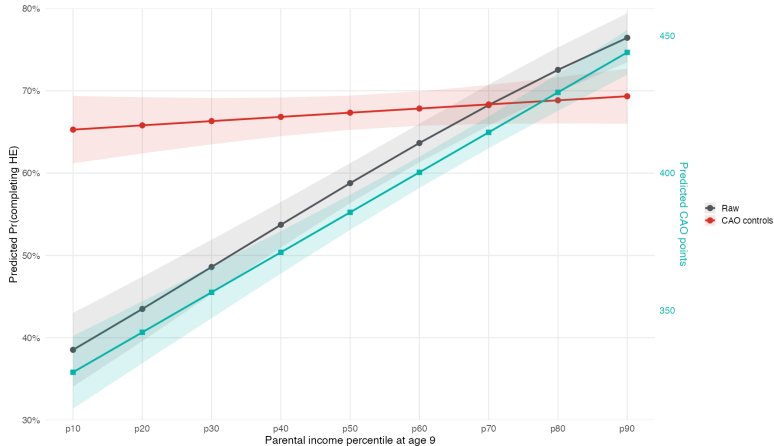
Authors' calculations using Growing Up in Ireland 2008 Cohort Research Microdata File.
Shaded bands = 95% confidence intervals. Each specification controls separately for one set of prior attainment measures.

However, this SES gradient almost flat once CAO points controlled for



Authors' calculations using Growing Up in Ireland 2008 Cohort Research Microdata File.
Shaded bands = 95% confidence intervals. Each specification controls separately for one set of prior attainment measures.

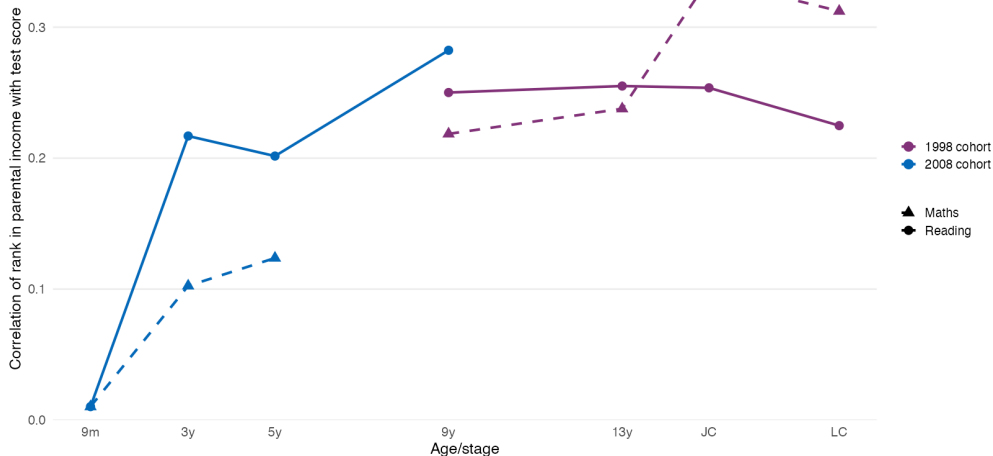
... as CAO points strongly associated with parental income percentile



Authors' calculations using Growing Up in Ireland 2008 Cohort Research Microdata File.
Left axis: predicted Pr(completing HE) from logit models (shaded = 95% CI). Right axis: predicted CAO points from OLS (shaded = 95% CI).

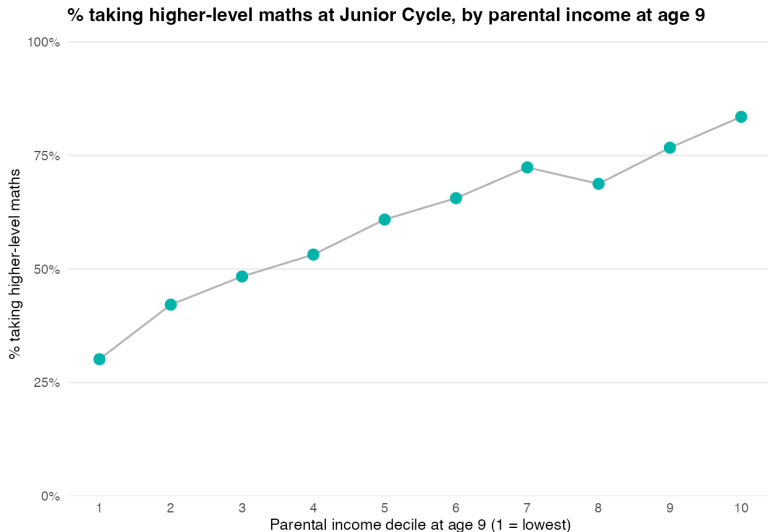
Evidence that gaps in skills open early & grow quickly

Income gradient in test scores across childhood and adolescence



Authors' calculations using Growing Up in Ireland 2008 Cohort Research Microdata File.

... with kids of highest-income parents c.3x more likely to take HL in JC



Suggests addressing SES gradients in HE requires early intervention

Good evidence that early-interventions can improve educational outcomes

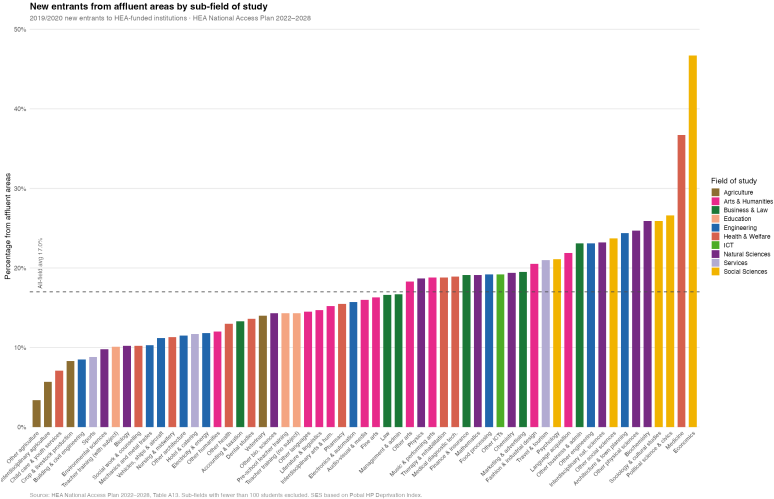
- ... including food-stamps & cash-transfers (Hoynes et al., 2016; Dahl and Lochner, 2012)
- ... and schemes like the UK's - now defunct - Sure Start (Carneiro et al., 2025)

What might an early-intervention targeting maths skills look like?

- One example is TAP IMPACT initiative for 2nd level maths teachers
 - IMPACT badge/flag to recognise excellent practice among teachers/schools
 - residential programme & in-school support for scholarship recipients
- But what about at/before primary school level?

Additional Slides & References

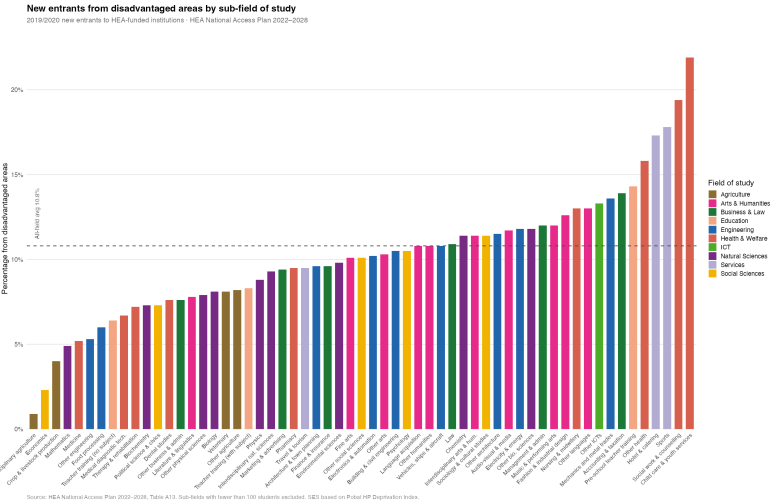
Substantial inequalities in what students study



Share disadvantaged by sub-field →

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Substantial inequalities in what students study



Evidence that gaps in skills open early & grow quickly

Correlation between cognitive skills and parental income percentiles

Cohort Age Metric			Initial	Current	Permanent
1998	25y	University Graduation	0.27	0.18	0.29
1998	20y	CAO Total Points	0.31	0.27	0.38
1998	20y	LC Maths	0.29	0.26	0.36
1998	20y	LC English	0.20	0.18	0.27
1998	17y	JC Maths	0.36	0.34	0.40
1998	17y	JC English	0.29	0.28	0.33
1998	13y	Drumcondra Maths	0.24	0.24	0.26
1998	13y	Drumcondra English	0.26	0.27	0.28
1998	9y	Drumcondra Maths	0.22	0.22	0.22
1998	9y	Drumcondra English	0.25	0.25	0.25

Evidence that gaps in skills open early & grow quickly

Correlation between cognitive skills and parental income percentiles

Coh.	Age	Metric	Math			Reading			
			Init.	Curr.	Perm.	Metric	Init.	Curr.	Perm.
2008	3y	Picture Sim.	0.11	0.12	0.12	Vocabulary	0.22	0.20	0.22
2008	5y	Picture Sim.	0.11	0.12	0.13	Vocabulary	0.21	0.18	0.21
2008	9y	Drumcondra	–	–	–	Drumcondra	0.27	0.27	0.31
1998	9y	Drumcondra	0.22	0.22	0.22	Drumcondra	0.25	0.25	0.25
1998	13y	Drumcondra	0.24	0.24	0.26	Drumcondra	0.26	0.27	0.28
1998	17y	Junior Cert.	0.36	0.34	0.40	Junior Cert.	0.29	0.28	0.33
1998	20y	Leaving Cert.	0.29	0.26	0.36	Leaving Cert.	0.20	0.18	0.27

References I

- CARNEIRO, P., S. CATTAN, G. CONTI, C. CRAWFORD, C. FARQUHARSON, AND N. RIDPATH (2025): *The short-and medium-term effects of Sure Start on children's outcomes*, IFS Report.
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- HOYNES, H., D. W. SCHANZENBACH, AND D. ALMOND (2016): "Long-run impacts of childhood access to the safety net," *American Economic Review*, 106, 903–934.