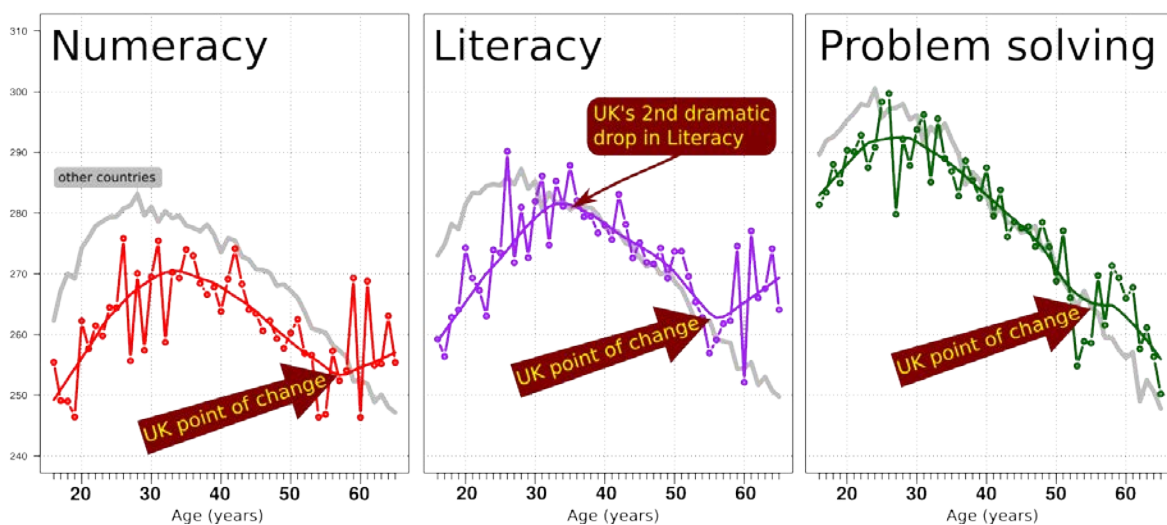


### Have Schools in England and Northern Ireland been letting children down?

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Researchers at the University of Glasgow are beginning to look closely at data from the recently published Programme of International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). Adults between 16 and 65 (in 2011/2012) in 24 countries were tested on their numerical, text understanding, and problem solving skills in technology-rich environments\*.

What is new in this analysis is that they can see the exact development over age, and some very specific points of change (see figure below).



There is a general pattern in the pattern of performance in relation to age: Peak performance is reached in the late twenties and declines from then on. This pattern is similar in all tested countries. It matches our general understanding of cognitive development in terms of learning and brain development, and later cognitive decline.

But performance in the UK (England and Northern Ireland, as Scotland and Wales did not take part in PIAAC) shows some striking features. The UK (the coloured lines in the figure) is generally below average (the grey line represents the average of the other countries). The big arrows indicate a first change in the pattern; adults over 55 performed equal or better than the international average. In other words, for adults who finished school before 1975 (when this generation reached the age of 18), have sustained their levels of basic skills learning through life. A later 2<sup>nd</sup> drop in performance, especially in literacy, is clear for the generation younger than 35. That is, the generation that went to school from the late 1980s onwards fell behind more than in other countries.

There are different possible reasons for these changes, and we can currently only speculate about them. Explanations could lie in changes to education policy for the school system, changes in professional practice within schools, or in changes in wider society outside schools. Possible causes include changes in methods of teaching “reading”, changes in school selectivity (e.g., comprehensive vs. selection by ability), and it is possible that opportunities to access learning opportunities after school through the life-course have not been sustained. Changes to the industrial scene in the 1980s led to the decline in many established communities with strong traditions of valuing education. Later on, the digital age changed the way (especially younger) people communicate. Whatever the exact causes, the pattern in England and Northern Ireland is unusual and raises important questions that need to be clarified.

These striking patterns should prompt an urgent debate between policy makers and education practitioners in different parts of the UK, to explore these various factors and their outcomes. We will continue to contribute to this debate.

*\*Details about data analysis:*

The following countries were included: Belgium (Flanders), Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Japan, South Korea, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Russia, Sweden, Slovak Republic, and the UK (England and Northern Ireland only). The (age) data of Austria, Australia, Canada, Germany, and the US were not available. In the UK, 8892 adults participated and participant numbers in other countries were similar. See also related news item: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-24442248>

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