

# Literacy and numeracy skills are improving in Northern Ireland

By Stephen McGonagle, Statistics & Research Branch, DEL

## iSTATS

**'Literacy'** - *'an individual's understanding, evaluating, using and engaging with written texts to participate in society, to achieve their goals and to develop their knowledge and potential.'*

**'Numeracy'** - *'the ability to access, use, interpret and communicate mathematical information and ideas, in order to engage in and manage the mathematical demands of a range of situations in adult life.'*

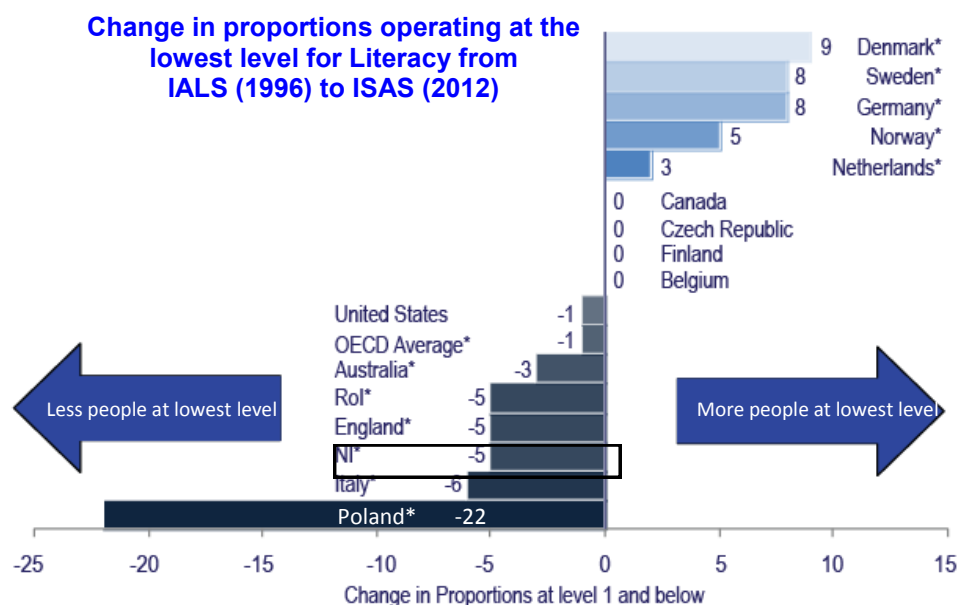
**'Level 1 and below'** *'the ability to read brief texts on familiar topics to locate a single piece of specific information or relatively short digital or print texts.'*

*Typical tasks -identifying a telephone number in a short piece of text; entering personal information in a document; identifying the location of a named place in a short descriptive paragraph; finding the most popular holiday destination on a simple bar graph.*

Adult literacy levels in Northern Ireland have improved over the last 15 years. Despite these improvements, working age adult skill levels have some way to go to match the best performing countries in literacy, numeracy and problem solving.

In 2012, an International Survey of Adult Skills (ISAS), led by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), assessed three skill areas (literacy, numeracy and problem solving) of the working age population. This survey allows two useful forms of comparison to be made. First, since it involves another 22 countries it allows us to see how Northern Ireland compares with other places around the world. Second, since Northern Ireland participated in a similar survey in 1996 it allows us to see whether or not our performance has improved over time in terms of literacy (there was no earlier survey for numeracy).

The good news is that adult literacy levels in Northern Ireland have been improving. When we were last measured in 1996, 23 per cent – almost a quarter – of adults performed at the lowest level (level 1 and below) of literacy. That has now dropped to 18 per cent. A five percentage drop is a markedly better achievement than in some other countries. Of those countries involved in both studies, Poland, Italy, England, Republic of Ireland, Australia and United States were the only other countries to show improvements.



\* Statistical analysis is required to determine if any changes in the proportions performing at the lowest level of ability within each country are 'real' or could have occurred by chance within the sample. An \* indicates that there has been a 'real' change between the 1996 and 2012 results.

PHOTO REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES

Despite the improvement in performance, Northern Ireland still has some way to go to match the best performing countries in literacy and numeracy. Our literacy level remains below the OECD average – lower than, for example, Canada, Australia or Japan. The new survey places us in a middle band along with our nearest neighbours: Northern Ireland falls into the same band as both England and the Republic of Ireland.

The current figures for numeracy show a similar picture. Northern Ireland's performance is positioned below the OECD average, but is still better than France, Italy, Spain and the USA. Once again, our scores place us in the same band as England and the Republic of Ireland. The new survey contains the same message for all of us: some improvement noted, but more required.

### **Comparison of average Literacy scores in Northern Ireland to other participating countries, ISAS 2012**

<b>Compared to Northern Ireland</b>	<b>Literacy</b>	<b>Numeracy</b>
<b>Countries above</b>	Japan; Finland; the Netherlands; Australia; Sweden; Norway; Estonia; Flanders (Belgium); Czech republic; Slovak republic; Canada; OECD average	Japan; Finland; the Netherlands; Australia; Sweden; Norway; Estonia; Flanders (Belgium); Czech republic; Slovak republic; Canada; Denmark; Austria; Germany; Cyprus; OECD average
<b>Countries no different</b>	England; Korea; Denmark; United States; Germany; Austria; Cyprus; Poland; Republic of Ireland	England; Korea; Poland; Republic of Ireland
<b>Countries below</b>	France; Spain; Italy	United States; France; Spain; Italy

**Source: PIAAC (2012)**

Countries with average scores in Literacy and Numeracy 'above or 'below', are statistically proven to be different from Northern Ireland average score. Countries with no difference in average scores for Literacy or Numeracy are also statistically proven to be no different to Northern Ireland average scores

For further information on proficiency levels in Northern Ireland from the 2012 survey please visit: <http://www.delni.gov.uk/index/statsandresearch/essential-skills-stats/stats-and-research-essential-skills-research.htm>