

Key findings from the Programme for International Student Assessment 2025 in Scotland

What is the Programme for International Student Assessment?

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), co-ordinated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is a global study of 15-year-olds' knowledge and skills, assessing reading, mathematics and science. It looks at how young people use what they have learnt to interpret information, reason, and solve problems in real-life contexts. One subject is examined in greater depth each cycle and in 2025 the spotlight was on science.

This cycle also introduced an additional domain, Learning in the Digital World, that explored how pupils use computational tools and thinking to build knowledge and tackle challenges in an increasingly digital world. In 2025, around 760,000 pupils across 91 countries and economies took part in PISA.

PISA 2025 in Scotland

Scotland has participated in every cycle since the study began in 2000. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) delivered the study on behalf of the Scottish Government, with the online assessments carried out in schools and colleges in September and October 2025.

A total of 115 schools and colleges and 3,066 pupils took part, providing a representative picture of the performance of Scotland's 15-year-olds. Assessment sessions were run under standardised conditions, following detailed international guidance on administration, timing and pupil support and quality assurance processes were in place throughout.

Scottish pupils participating in PISA 2025 would have been aged 9 or 10 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, which would have coincided with their transition from primary to secondary school. Although PISA cannot measure the disruption to education from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important context for understanding the educational journey of this cohort.

Key findings

Science

- Scotland performed significantly above the OECD average in science
- Science performance was similar for boys and girls
- The relationship between socio-economic background and science performance was significantly weaker than in 2022
- While the average science score in PISA 2025 was significantly lower than in 2006, 2009 and 2012, there was no statistically significant difference between Scotland's performance in 2025 and its performance in 2015, 2018, or 2022

Mathematics

- Scotland's results for mathematics were similar to the OECD average.
- Boys performed better on average than girls
- The relationship between socio-economic background and mathematics performance was significantly weaker than in 2022
- Over the longer-term, mathematics performance in 2025 was significantly lower than in every PISA cycle prior to the Covid pandemic

Reading

- Scotland's reading score was significantly above the OECD average
- Girls scored significantly higher than boys in reading
- The relationship between socio-economic background and reading performance was significantly weaker than in previous cycles
- The longer-term pattern differed between the boys and girls, with boys' results in 2025 being significantly lower than in several previous cycles, while girls' performance remained consistent with most earlier cycles



Computational problem solving and environmental science

- Scotland scored significantly above the OECD average in both the new areas introduced in PISA 2025
- Performance was particularly strong in computational problem solving, with almost three in ten pupils reaching the two highest proficiency levels
- Both boys and girls performed significantly above their respective OECD averages

Contextual findings

- Pupils reported high levels of curiosity, strong support from teachers and families, and positive views of the value of school
- Socio-economic background remained linked to performance, with pupils from more advantaged backgrounds continuing to perform better on average
- However, this association was weaker in 2025 than in several previous PISA cycles, with a particularly marked change in reading, indicating that while inequalities persist, the strength of the relationship can shift over time and across domains
- Findings highlight ongoing challenges relating to: staffing; digital resources; attendance; bullying and pupils' perceptions of how well school prepares them for adult life

Conclusion

- PISA 2025 shows a mixed picture with several strong positive findings
- The longer-term declines previously seen across science, mathematics and reading have stabilised, with no significant change in performance between 2022 and 2025
- Performance in science and reading remain significantly above the OECD average
- However, results remain below the levels achieved in some earlier cycles