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International Literacy Assessments

OECD (2013). *OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills*. OECD Publishing.
http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/oecd-skills-outlook-2013_9789264204256-en

This report presents the initial results of the [Survey of Adult Skills \(PIAAC\)](#), which evaluated the skills of adults in [24 countries](#). About 166 000 adults aged 16-65 were surveyed in the 24 countries and sub-national regions, including 22 OECD member countries, and two partner countries – Cyprus and the Russian Federation. The survey directly assessed respondents’ literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving in technology-rich environments (PS-TRE) skills. The survey also gathered relevant background information on respondents, including self-reported health status and educational qualifications, and information on how they use their skills in daily life and at work.

This report does not emphasize possible comparisons between these results and those of the previous survey (ALL/IALSS) at this time because of changes between the two and the addition of new domains. For example, two domains from ALL, prose literacy and document literacy, were combined into one called “literacy” in PIAAC. To permit comparisons over time, the data collected for those two domains has been statistically “combined and re-estimated”. The report indicates that a future publication will focus on such comparisons.

In this report, there is frequent reference to “low-skilled adults”, that is, adults who tested at Level 1 or below, or “highly skilled adults”, those who scored at Level 4 or higher. This is a contrast to more definitive claims following ALL/IALSS results that Level 3 was the “minimum level of skills required to function effectively in today’s economy and society.”

While the survey found wide disparities in skills between participating countries, disparities were actually greater within countries, and even the highest ranking countries had a significant percentage of their adult populations at Level 1 or below. Some countries, however, had greater disparity in skills than others: these tended to be the countries that also have the highest levels of social and economic inequality. The countries that fared best were those with higher levels of participation in adult education programs. Even in those, however, people who already had higher skills were considerably more likely to participate in such programs. Education levels

were positively associated with higher skill levels, but not a guarantee of them: in almost all countries there were significant numbers of adults with only high school degrees who outperformed adults with a university degree. Those who engaged in literacy, numeracy and ICT activities at and outside of work tended to have stronger skills, even after adjusting for educational attainment. On average, proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem-solving peaked at about 30 years of age and declined after. This pattern was not universal: while South Korea shows a huge decline after 30 years of age, in England the 16-24 age group did no better than people aged 55-65.

The survey found a weak correlation between workers' skills levels and their use of skills at work, suggesting some mismatch between workers' skills and the skills required by their jobs. Higher skill levels were associated with higher incomes, better health, more civic engagement, and more trust of others.

The OECD report recommends that policy makers provide high quality initial education and life-long opportunities that are accessible to all, develop links between education systems and the workplace, provide training for workers that is relevant and flexible enough to be accessible to all and adapted to learners' needs, identify those most at risk of poor skills proficiency, show adults how they can benefit from improving their skills, provide easy-to-find information about adult education activities, recognize and certify skills proficiency through a framework of qualifications based on reliable assessment procedures, and collect timely information about the demand for and supply of skills. The report also recommends a range of policies to encourage greater labour force participation and greater mobility between jobs (to alleviate skills mismatch).

This report is the first edition of the OECD *Skills Outlook*, a series of documents presenting analysis of data from OECD skills initiatives such as PIAAC and PISA, as part of the OECD Skills Strategy.

Keywords: [Ageing](#), [International literacy assessments](#), [Labour market outcomes](#), [Literacy proficiency](#), [Numeracy](#), [Policy](#), [Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies \(PIAAC\)](#), [Skill retention](#), [Skills mismatch](#), [Skills shortages](#), [Surveys](#), [Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills \(WLES\)](#)

Statistics Canada. (2013). *Skills in Canada: First Results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies*. <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/bsolc/olc-cel/olc-cel?catno=89-555-X2013001&lang=eng>

This report presents the first Canadian results of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), an initiative of OECD. Canada is one of 24 countries and sub-national regions participating and collected the largest sample of all participating countries (27 000 respondents) to allow reliable estimation at the national, provincial and territorial level. Target populations were over-sampled to allow for reliable data: these populations include recent immigrants, aboriginals in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, British Columbia (only those living off-reserve in large urban population centres), Yukon, Northwest

Territories, and Nunavut, and linguistic minorities (Anglophones in Québec, Francophones in Ontario, New Brunswick, and Manitoba)

Canada scored at around the OECD average on literacy, but there were greater disparities within its population than the average. That is, there were more people at the highest and lowest levels of literacy. Canada was below average in numeracy, and also had a higher proportion of people at Level 1 than the average. Canada was above average in PS-TRE, and ranked second to Sweden in the proportion of its population at the highest level of proficiency. A higher proportion of Canadians than average use information and communication technologies.

Literacy and numeracy scores were highest in the 25-34 age group. PS-TRE scores were highest in the 16-34 age group; however, 9% of those in the 16-24 age group tested in the lowest level. Although Aboriginal skill levels were generally lower than the average, those living in Ontario had levels similar to the average levels of the provinces of Quebec and New Brunswick, and those in BC had an average score similar to that of Newfoundland and Labrador. Immigrants in the country for five years and more had slightly higher average literacy scores than more recent immigrants – but there was virtually no difference in Quebec and Ontario. Canada oversampled (Aboriginal peoples), immigrants, and official-language minorities to better understand skill levels within these populations.

The report does not draw conclusions or make recommendations but notes the need for further analysis and research.

Keywords: [Aboriginal peoples](#), [Canada](#), [Digital competencies](#), [Immigrants](#), [Literacy proficiency](#), [Numeracy](#), [Official Language Minorities](#)

Sturm M, & Ahmadpour K. (2013). *Voices Speak to the Data: Feedback from Participants in the PIAAC On-line Field Trial*. AlphaPlus. http://alphaplus.ca/en/web-tools/online-publications-a-reportsgroup1/voices-speak-to-the-data/cat_view/77-voices-speak-to-the-data-feedback-from-participants-in-the-piaac-on-line-field-trial.html

PIAAC On-line, also known as the Education and Skills Online Assessment, was developed by the OECD as an assessment tool that could provide individual results that can be benchmarked against national and international results in the PIAAC survey. The tool was pilot-tested in Canada in mid-2013. The PIAAC Online Field Trial was carried out by the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) and the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. [AlphaPlus](#), an Ontario-based organization that promotes the use of digital technologies to improve adult literacy skills, conducted their own survey of literacy practitioners about their and their learners' experiences in participating in the Online Field Trial. PTP Adult Learning and Employment Programs conducted a separate survey of learner participants in the Field Trial. This report shares findings from both surveys. The sample sizes were small (13 answered the AlphaPlus survey; 21 answered the PTP survey) and so care should be taken in interpreting the results. Most respondents found that PIAAC Online was too long. The adult educators surveyed by AlphaPlus expressed concerns about the difficulty and relevance of some questions, and that learners would find some of the background questions overly personal. They also found aspects

of the online tool frustrating. The PTP learners generally thought that the test was relevant to what they were learning in their program and appropriate for their level, but many found it too long and demanding of their attention and concentration. They also had difficulty understanding the purpose of the questions and could not see a clear connection between the test and further education and “workplace skills needs of the 21st Century”. Based on these results, the report recommends that learners taking the test go through an orientation session to explain the purpose and methodology of the test; that it be possible to take the test in two or three sessions; that the online tool include a progress tracker so learners know where they are in the test, features that would allow instructors and assessors to choose test sections that align with learners’ employment and learning goals; and that a final score and qualitative feedback be provided at the end of the test.

Keywords: [Aboriginal peoples](#), [Canada](#), [Digital competencies](#), [Immigrants](#), [Literacy proficiency](#), [Numeracy](#), [Official Language Minorities](#)

Program Evaluation

Economist Intelligence Unit. (2012). *The Learning Curve: Lessons in Country Performance in Education – 2012 Report*. Pearson. <http://thelearningcurve.pearson.com/the-report>

This report is part of a program of quantitative and qualitative analysis conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit on behalf of Pearson Publishing called [The Learning Curve](#) aimed at helping policymakers, educators, academics and other specialists identify some of the factors that contribute to outstanding educational performance. For this report, the researchers gathered and analyzed data from [The Learning Curve Data Bank](#) (LCDB), which is accessible online. The LCDB brings together internationally comparable data on education inputs and outputs covering over 50 countries. The researchers analyzed the data to test possible correlations between inputs, outputs and various socio-economic outcomes”. The quantitative inputs included spending on pupils and class size while qualitative inputs included the level of school choice. A number of inputs show a statistical link over time with certain outputs, notably between income and results. However, the researchers found that there were relatively few correlations and that “inputs are turned into outputs in ways that are difficult to predict or quantify consistently”. The experts they consulted pointed out that “simply pouring resources into a system is not enough: far more important are the processes which use these resources.” This project also features the Global Index of Cognitive Skills and Educational Attainment, a global ranking of educational outcomes based on results in various international tests of cognitive skills as well as measures of literacy and graduation rates. The Index covers 40 countries (not as many as LCDB) and ranks Finland and South Korea as the top performers. It should be noted that the index aggregates different data sets on different scales from different sources in a way that involves subjective choices about what data sets to include and the relative weight given to each. The lessons proposed for policymakers are: there are no simple answers or recipes; it is essential to recognize the value of good teaching and good teachers;

culture is as important to educational outcomes as the educational system itself; and educational systems need to prepare people for the future as well as the present.

Keywords: Education systems, [Policy](#), [Program evaluation](#)

Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills (WLES)

Burleton D, Gulati S, McDonald C, & Scarfone S. (2013). *Jobs in Canada: Where, What and for Whom?* TD Economics. TD Economics. <http://www.td.com/document/PDF/economics/special/JobsInCanada.pdf>

This report on Canadian labour market trends finds that perceptions of a widespread shortage of skilled labour in Canada are not supported by the data. The researchers draw on data from the OECD (including recently released PIAAC data), as well as Canadian labour market reports, the 2011 Household Survey and other studies. They find that overall there is little sign of tightness in the labour market: the employment to population ratio remains significantly lower than it was before the 2008-09 recession and wage increases are modest. Meanwhile, measures of mismatch show mixed results since the recession, and even in occupations where there is a perceived shortage, vacancy rates are only moderately higher than average and wage pressures are modest. The researchers also note that long-term labour market forecasts depend in large part on the assumptions fed into the prediction model. However, even if there is no looming crisis, the researchers argue that some actions to improve the supply and demand of skills in the labour market would still be good for Canada.

Keywords: [Canada](#), [Labour market](#), [Skills mismatch](#), [Skills shortages](#), [Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills \(WLES\)](#)

Karml T, Lu T, & Oliver D. (2013). *Starting out in low-skill jobs*. National Centre for Vocational Education Research. Available at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2649.html>

This research analyzes data from the 1998 Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth to find out whether a “low-skill” job is a good start to the working life of those who have left full-time education. In particular, the researchers wanted to find out the extent to which such jobs are “stepping stones” or “low-skill traps”. Jobs were assessed as high or low skilled based on the five skill levels allotted for each occupation in the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations. The researchers found that starting out in a low-skill job gives lower payoffs than starting out in a high-skill job, and that this “wage penalty” remains five years after leaving full-time education, although it diminishes over time. However, they also found that starting out in a low-skilled job was still better than not having a job at all.

Keywords: [Australia](#), [Labour market outcomes](#), [Longitudinal studies](#), [Occupations](#), [Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills \(WLES\)](#)

Return on Investment (ROI)

Parker J & Spangenberg G. *Stepping Up to ROI in Adult Education: A Survey of State Activity*. Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL). Available at <http://www.caalusa.org/SteppingUptoROI.pdf>.

This report presents findings from a survey carried out in the United States from January to June 2013. The survey is part of a project that will include an invitational Roundtable in November and a related companion paper in February 2014. The researchers reviewed literature on ROI with special attention paid to previous research carried out by the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL). They also surveyed state adult education directors or designates on what state adult education programs are doing on the ROI front, how and why they are doing it, and with what provable/quantifiable results. They looked at “the extent to which programs measure outcomes identified as important to employers and current/future employees, and the extent to which the states are prepared to implement expanded Workforce Investment Act (WIA) ROI measures if/when the reformed WIA is passed. It looks at whether states offer college or work-readiness certificate programs and, if so, if there is a connection between those programs and the gathering of ROI evidence. It considers ABE governance, comprehensive state planning, and other variables to see if there are causative links to ROI activity. Forty-nine states and the District of Columbia responded to the survey.” They found a “mixed” record: most states are starting to collect data on benefits from learning that could be used for ROI and many say that they could directly calculate ROI if they had the resources. Two states reported that their involvement in special initiatives such as [Shifting Gears](#), [Accelerating Opportunity](#) and [Policy to Performance](#) had helped them to determine ROI (17 other states participating in one or more of these programs said that their involvement had not helped them to determine ROI).

Keywords: [Program evaluation](#), [Return on Investment \(ROI\)](#), [United States](#)

Social Finance

Palameta B, Myers K & Conte N. (2013). *Performance-based funding: Can it improve essential skills outcomes?* <http://www.srdc.org/newsletter/performance-based-funding-can-it-improve-essential-skills-outcomes.aspx>

This study by SRDC and Workplace Education Manitoba explores the current state of knowledge on performance-based funding (PBF) and its application to Essential Skills programs. The study, funded by the federal Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES), involved a review of the literature, an expert panel, and a presentation at the 2012 Canadian Economics Association Annual Meetings. The study is part of the Pay for Performance Project funded by OLES to develop a performance-based funded model for Essential Skills training delivery that can be pilot-tested in Canada. The researchers found that there are a variety of PBF designs; that small amounts of PBF may change provider behavior, that these changes aren’t necessarily positive, as they may include “strategic” behaviour or gaming that provides no benefit or is even detrimental to learners; that many systems use short-term indicators with no demonstrable link

to long-term benefits, so that hitting the target “may mean missing the point”; that it is very difficult to separate the impact of PBF per se from that of measures often introduced along with PBF. However, they also found that there is emerging evidence that PBF designs can improve outcomes if they are built on a measurement framework that “establishes timely and meaningful connections” between providers’ day-to-day practice and performance. The researchers identify the Washington State’s Initiative as a success story, and set out a proposed model that rewards achievement of key milestones, focuses on ‘in-program’ indicators and promotes collaboration among, rather than competition between, agencies.

Keywords: [Canada](#), [Case studies](#), [Literature reviews](#), [Pay-for-Performance](#)