

Conclusion

Directions for further work

This report confirms many of the conclusions revealed through analysis of IALS data, including:

- Large differences in skills exist both within and between countries.
- Most of the differences in the level and distribution of skill can be explained using the variables that are available from the study background questionnaire. These include social background, education and a range of variables that reflect how adults lead their lives.
- The differences in the level and distribution of skill are associated with large differences in outcomes in multiple life domains – work, education, home and the community.

This report also reveals a number of new insights including:

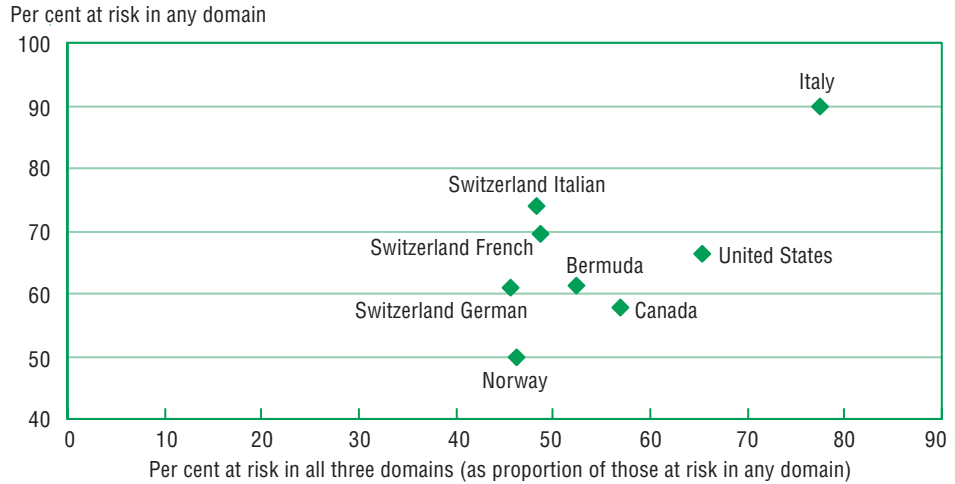
- Evidence of significant changes in the distribution of skill by skill level that differ by country and by age. Although changes in mean country performance are not substantial, the results show some improvement among the five per cent of adults with the lowest scores. There is also some evidence of skill loss in some population sub-group.
- Large differences within and between countries in the intensity of ICT use were observed. In some countries, respondents with medium to high literacy skills have between two and three times the odds of being high intensity computer user. This has implications for future wage inequality, given the strong relationship observed between literacy, high ICT use and income.
- General health status and health status at work both appear to be strongly related to literacy.

As mentioned at the outset, the ALL study also makes it possible to explore patterns of individual strength and weakness among the four skill domains assessed by the ALL. The fact that large numbers of adults in each country display weakness in multiple skill domains is a matter of serious concern. Figure C1 reveals, however, that the pattern of skill weakness varies considerably by country.

FIGURE C1

The depth of risk

Number of adults aged 16 to 65 at Levels 1 and 2 in prose literacy, document literacy and numeracy as a per cent of the total population at Level 1 and 2 in any domain by country, 2003



Source: Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, 2003.

Information on patterns of disadvantage provides useful input for the design of remedial education programs. Precisely what the policy prescription would be for each country will need to be the subject of focused national analysis, using the ALL data set. The purpose of this conclusion, therefore, is not to explore policy directions or options for countries to pursue. Rather the goal is to highlight priorities for further analysis of the ALL data and to identify missing data elements that must be addressed by future comparative surveys of adult skills.

Priorities for further analysis

As revealed in Figure C1 there are significant proportions of adults in all countries who display serious weaknesses in multiple skill domains. Thus, there is an urgent need to analyze the complementarity and substitutability of different skills clusters. It is not at all clear whether ad hoc part time workplace or informal approaches will yield the desired skill gains. There is a particular need to clarify this issue for vulnerable groups such as language minorities, immigrants and indigenous populations

The findings show that the high ICT use requires prior literacy and numeracy skill. ICT skills, in turn, amplify the productivity effects of capital and labour and hence drive inequality in wages. Thus any attempt to mitigate the digital divide must first address shortcomings in literacy and numeracy (Kirsch and Lennon, 2002). Thus more in-depth analysis is required to understand the link between the skills measured in ALL and industrial and occupational segmentation and productivity growth.

The countries surveyed here differ greatly in the investments they are making to support formal, non-formal and informal learning. These differences

in strategy are often the result of unintended consequences of differing assumptions about the balance of skill demand and supply, in particular, the extent to which the initial education system can satisfy the skill requirements of labour markets. It has often been assumed that informal learning at work and in daily life can mitigate skill shortages. The ALL findings would seem to challenge this assumption but further analysis is required to understand the interaction between different modes of adult learning and especially the role of the workplace in skill formation.

The relationships between literacy, numeracy, health status, and various labour market outcomes are sufficiently strong to posit that investments in foundation skills would lead to improved levels of health, increased productivity, reduced social costs, and higher growth. Further analysis could attempt to identify separately the direct and indirect effects of literacy and numeracy on health.

Analyses of the IALS data have revealed much larger than expected effects of foundation skills on long-term macro-economic growth (Coulombe, Tremblay and Marchand, 2004). Yet there still remains considerable doubt about the relationship between literacy and numeracy and higher order skills, and how skill hierarchies precipitate growth. A large challenge for further analysis is therefore to undertake macro-economic growth modelling while disentangling the direct and mediated effects of different types of skill.

This report has presented the first analysis of change in skill profiles over time for the countries that collected data at two time intervals. The results point to significant skill loss in several countries. Given the high costs and returns accruing to skill development, the top priority for further work is to study the determinants of skill gain and loss.

Priorities for future adult skill assessments

Three priorities flow naturally from the findings presented above. First, there is a need to directly assess the ICT skills of workers to better understand their impact on productivity growth and individual outcomes. Second, the link between skill and health calls for a focused assessment of health literacy demands, corresponding skills, and direct observations on health indicators. Third, understanding the dynamic of skill gain and loss depends critically on a survey design that samples workers from within firms and segmented labour markets.

The *Definition and Selection of Key Competencies* (DeSeCo) programme of work (Rychen and Salganik, 2001, 2003) identifies key competencies that are essential for the personal and social development of people in modern, complex societies. Supported and endorsed by the OECD and Member states, DeSeCo provides a conceptual frame of reference to guide future adult skill assessments. It defines three skill categories: interacting in socially heterogeneous groups; acting autonomously; and using tools interactively. The ALL survey has made progress towards measuring the latter type of skill and related values and beliefs. It remains a priority for future surveys to enrich the DeSeCo conceptual framework as well as to develop more operational assessment frameworks and associated measurement instruments. The assessment of the ability to relate well to others, to co-operate, and to manage and resolve conflicts, and to act autonomously, is particularly relevant to future assessments of adult skills in pluralistic societies.

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Data Values for the Figures

TABLE C1

Number of adults aged 16 to 65 at Levels 1 and 2 in prose literacy, document literacy and numeracy as a per cent of the total population at Level 1 and 2 in any domain by country, 2003

	Number of domains in which individuals are at risk (Below Level 3)								At risk in all 3 domains as a percentage of those at risk in any domain	
	0		1		2		3			
Bermuda	38.8	(0.02)	16.0	(0.01)	13.1	(0.01)	32.1	(0.01)	52.5	(0.01)
Canada	42.1	(0.01)	14.5	(0.01)	10.5	(0.01)	32.9	(0.01)	56.8	(0.01)
Italy	10.3	(0.01)	8.5	(0.01)	11.7	(0.01)	69.5	(0.01)	77.4	(0.01)
Norway	50.2	(0.01)	16.0	(0.01)	10.8	(0.01)	23.1	(0.01)	46.3	(0.01)
Switzerland (French)	30.4	(0.02)	16.7	(0.02)	19.0	(0.02)	33.9	(0.02)	48.7	(0.02)
Switzerland (German)	39.1	(0.02)	15.8	(0.01)	17.3	(0.02)	27.8	(0.02)	45.6	(0.02)
Switzerland (Italian)	26.1	(0.02)	16.6	(0.01)	21.6	(0.02)	35.6	(0.01)	48.2	(0.01)
United States	33.7	(0.02)	12.3	(0.01)	10.7	(0.01)	43.3	(0.01)	65.4	(0.01)

Source: Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, 2003.

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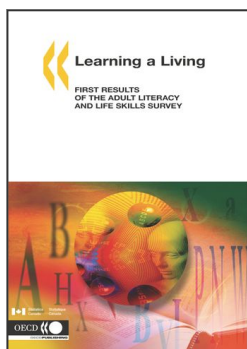
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From:
Learning a Living
First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264010390-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD/Statistics Canada (2005), "Conclusion", in *Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264010390-14-en>

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