

## *Chapter 1*

### **The Survey of Adult Skills and the role of this special report**

*The basic skills of literacy and numeracy are of huge importance to our economies and societies. The OECD's new Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) assesses skills of literacy, numeracy and a newly assessed domain of "problem solving in technology-rich environments" in a number of countries. This special report, to be published alongside the main international survey, looks at the results for the United States and identifies their policy implications.*

The “basic skills” of literacy and numeracy are among the most fundamental attributes of human beings and their civilization, lying at the root of our capacity to communicate and live and work together, to develop and share knowledge, science and culture. Their contribution to workforce skills has increasingly been recognized as critical to economic success, while evidence on gaps in adult basic skills and the link with economic and social outcomes has also been growing, both at national and international level (e.g. through the International Survey of Adult Skills of 1994-98 and Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey of 2003-2007). Most tellingly, there has been a belated realization that despite universal basic education in advanced countries, some adults have slipped through the net, leaving them with very weak literacy and numeracy.

All of these factors underline the importance of the OECD’s new international Survey of Adult Skills (see Box 1.1 and Annex A). Alongside the publication of the international Survey (OECD, 2013a), at the request of OVAE in the U.S. Department of Education, the OECD agreed to prepare the current special report on the U.S. to be published simultaneously. In addition to analysis conducted specifically for this report, it draws heavily on results and analysis published in the international Survey (OECD, 2013a). Its aim is to draw out the policy implications of the Survey for the U.S., while also making use of some additional data collected for the Survey on the U.S. alone. The study does not directly seek to evaluate relevant US policies and programs – such as schooling and adult education – which would be a different and much more ambitious exercise. Instead it aims to identify in the results of the Survey some key lessons about the strategic objectives and directions which should form a frame for policy development, including policy on adult learning and schooling.

The skills measured by the Survey are the joint outcome of individual qualities and a lifetime of experience at home, at school and college, and at work – in other words the result of a vastly complex set of interacting factors. This snapshot can give us clues about how skills are formed, and help us to pinpoint weak skills as a guide to intervention priorities, but it rarely gives us direct evidence about the interventions that work best. The snapshot is akin to an MRI scan in the hands of a doctor, a powerful diagnostic tool that can guide but not directly determine the required therapy. Consequently the policy recommendations advanced here are broad.

Chapter 2 of this report sets out some main findings of the Survey and looks at the implications and some potential explanations. Chapter 3 draws out policy implications in the form of recommendations. The analysis gives special attention to those with weak basic skills, their circumstances and how their needs might best be addressed.

### Box 1.1 The OECD Survey of Adult Skills

The Survey, a product of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), assesses the skills of adults in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments.

- The **literacy** assessment covers a range of skills from the decoding of written words and sentences to the comprehension, interpretation and evaluation of complex texts (but not writing).
- The **numeracy** assessment involves managing a situation or solving a problem in a real context, by responding to mathematical content/information/ideas represented in multiple ways.
- The **problem solving in technology-rich environments** assessment focuses on the abilities to solve problems for personal, work and civic purposes by setting up appropriate goals, and accessing and making use of information through computers.

Each of the three assessments yields results scaled from 0 to 500 points. The scales are divided into six levels in literacy and numeracy (Levels 1 through 5 plus below Level 1) and four for problem solving in technology-rich environments (Levels 1 through 3 plus below Level 1). (Annexes B, C and D describe what adults can typically do at different levels of skill). The purpose of skill levels is to facilitate the interpretation of the results, and not as standards defining levels of skill required for particular purposes.

In addition, the Survey collects a range of information on the reading- and numeracy-related activities of respondents, the use of information and communication technologies at work and in everyday life, and on a range of generic skills, such as teamwork and time management.

More than 160 000 adults aged 16 to 65 were surveyed in 24 countries and sub-national regions: 22 OECD member countries – Australia, Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom (England and Northern Ireland), and the United States; and two partner countries – Cyprus\*\* and the Russian Federation (\*\*see notes A and B in OECD, 2013b). Data collection for the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) took place from 1 August 2011 to 31 March 2012 in most participating countries.

Source: OECD (2013a), *OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills*, OECD Publishing. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264204256-en>; OECD (2013b), *The Survey of Adult Skills: Reader's Companion*, OECD Publishing. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264204027-en>

## References

- OECD (2013a), *OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills*, OECD Publishing. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264204256-en>
- OECD (2013b), *The Survey of Adult Skills: Reader's Companion*, OECD Publishing. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264204027-en>



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