



Foreword

It is no exaggeration to use the word “revolution” when talking about how our lives have changed over the past few decades. Today we rely on information and communication technologies and devices that hadn’t even been imagined in 1980. The way we live and work has changed profoundly – and so has the set of skills we need to participate fully in and benefit from our hyper-connected societies and increasingly knowledge-based economies.

Governments need a clear picture not only of how labour markets and economies are changing, but of the extent to which their citizens are equipping themselves with the skills demanded in the 21st century, since people with low skills proficiency face a much greater risk of economic disadvantage, a higher likelihood of unemployment, and poor health. Our new publication series, *the OECD Skills Outlook*, aims to provide that picture. It will offer an annual overview of how skills are being developed, activated and used across OECD and partner countries, and highlight the kinds of education, employment, tax and other social policies that encourage and allow people to make the most of their potential.

This inaugural edition of the *OECD Skills Outlook* is devoted to reporting the results of the first round of the Survey of Adult Skills, a product of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). The survey provides a rich source of data on adults’ proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments – the key information-processing skills that are invaluable in 21st-century economies – and in various “generic” skills, such as co-operation, communication, and organising one’s time.

If there is one central message emerging from this new survey, it is that what people know and what they do with what they know has a major impact on their life chances. The median hourly wage of workers who can make complex inferences and evaluate subtle truth claims or arguments in written texts is more than 60% higher than for workers who can, at best, read relatively short texts to locate a single piece of information. Those with low literacy skills are also more than twice as likely to be unemployed. The survey also shows that how literacy skills are distributed across a population has significant implications on how economic and social outcomes are distributed within the society. If large proportions of adults have low reading and numeracy skills, introducing and disseminating productivity-improving technologies and work-organisation practices can therefore be hampered. But the impact of skills goes far beyond earnings and employment. In all countries, individuals with lower proficiency in literacy are more likely than those with better literacy skills to report poor health, to believe that they have little impact on political processes, and not to participate in associative or volunteer activities. In most countries, they are also less likely to trust others.

These results, and results from future rounds of the survey, will inform much of the analysis contained in subsequent editions of the *Outlook*. The *Outlook* will build on the extensive body of OECD work in education and training, including findings from its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and its policy reviews of vocational education and training, and its work on skills, particularly the Skills Strategy – the integrated, cross-government framework developed by experts across the Organisation to help countries understand more about how to invest in skills in ways that will transform lives and drive economies. The *OECD Skills Outlook* will show us where we are, where we need to be, and how to get there if we want to be fully engaged citizens in a global economy.

Angel Gurría
OECD Secretary-General

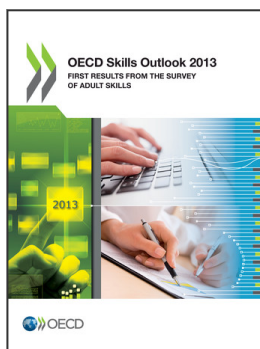


Acknowledgements

This Survey of Adult Skills is the outcome of a collaboration among the participating countries, the OECD Secretariat, the European Commission and an international Consortium led by Educational Testing Service (ETS). The report was prepared by Ji Eun Chung, Richard Desjardins, Viktoria Kis, Michele Pellizzari, Glenda Quintini, Andreas Schleicher and William Thorn, with the assistance of Veronica Borg, Vanessa Denis, Anne Fichen and Paulina Granados Zambrano. Marilyn Achiron, Célia Braga-Schich, Cassandra Davis, Elizabeth Del Bourgo, Marta Encinas-Martin, Lynda Hawe and Elisabeth Villoutreix provided valuable support in the editorial and production process. Administrative assistance was provided by Sabrina Leonarduzzi.

The international Consortium was responsible for developing the assessment instruments and preparing the underlying data under the direction of Irwin Kirsch. Iddo Gal, Stan Jones, Ken Mayhew, Jean-François Rouet and John P. Sabatini led the expert groups that oversaw the development of the background questionnaire and cognitive assessment instruments. Cees Glas chaired the project's Technical Advisory Group.

The development of the project was steered by the PIAAC Board of Participating Countries, chaired by Satya Brink (Canada) from 2008 to 2010, Dan McGrath (United States) from 2010 to 2013 and Paolo Sestito (Italy) from 2008 to 2013. A full list of the members of the Board together with the names of the National Project Managers, experts, members of the international Consortium and staff of the OECD Secretariat who have contributed to the project can be found in Annex C of *The Survey of Adult Skills: Reader's Companion*.



From:
OECD Skills Outlook 2013
First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264204256-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2013), "Foreword and Acknowledgements", in *OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264204256-1-en>

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