

## PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARIES

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### **BUILDING ON OUR COMPETENCIES: CANADIAN RESULTS OF THE INTERNATIONAL ADULT LITERACY AND SKILLS SURVEY SUMMARY BY JAMES E. PAGE**

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#### **What is this study about?**

*Building on our Competencies* was published in 2005 and presents the results of the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS). IALSS is the Canadian component of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills program (ALL), a large-scale international study involving Canada, Bermuda, Italy, Norway, Switzerland, the United States and the Mexican State of Nuevo Leon.

In addition to presenting profiles of the literacy skills of Canadians, this report provides an analysis of Canadians' numeracy and problem solving abilities. It also shows how these skills affect Canadians' use of computers and other information and communication technologies. Because the 2003 literacy scores are directly comparable to the 1994 IALS results, the report allows the reader to understand changes in literacy patterns in Canada over the past decade.

*Building on our Competencies* contains five chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter provides comparisons of adult competencies within Canada and compares the Canadian results with the other countries in the survey. The second explores the relationships between age, gender, education and Canadians' skills in literacy, numeracy and problem solving. Chapter three examines the patterns of these skills among linguistic minorities, Aboriginal populations, and immigrants.

The fourth chapter examines labour force outcomes such as type of work and income in relation to Canadian's proficiency in prose and document literacy, numeracy and problem solving. It also looks at participation in adult education and learning activities in relation to proficiency.

The fifth chapter sheds light on the relationships between skills levels and the health of individuals and the welfare of society as a whole. It then explores the effects of literacy proficiency on both volunteering and civic participation as indicators of citizen engagement. This final chapter also examines the implications of the increasingly wide use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) in Canada on peoples' daily lives both at work and at home.

### **What are the questions addressed by the study?**

The key question addressed by *Building on our Competencies* was whether or not the literacy and numeracy skill levels of Canadians had changed since the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) of 1994. It also sought to refine the definition of literacy and to explore other “essential skills” like problem solving. The skills definitions used for this study are:

*Prose Literacy*: the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts, including editorials, news stories, poems and fiction;

*Document Literacy*: the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats like tables, graphs, schedules, charts, forms, and maps); and

*Numeracy*: the knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations, either alone or sequentially, to numbers embedded in printed materials, such as balancing an account, figuring out a tip, completing an order form or determining the amount of interest on a loan from an advertisement.

*Problem Solving*: involves goal-directed thinking and action in situations for which no routine solution procedure is available. The understanding of the problem situation and its step-by-step transformation, based on planning and reasoning constitute the process of problem solving.

The prose and document definitions were those used in the 1994 study so results can be compared. However the old quantitative scale was altered to increase its reliability and was renamed “numeracy”, so it is not directly comparable with the 1994 results. Since problem solving was a skills area introduced into this latest survey, there is no basis for a comparison to the 1994 survey.

### **Why is this study important?**

This study is important because, contrary to expectations, it reveals Canada’s average literacy scores in 2003 had not changed significantly since 1994. However, *Building on our Competencies* also shows that there have been changes in the distribution of skills between and among the provinces and territories, and by socio-economic factors such as ethnicity and age. It affirms the IALS findings that there are strong linkages between literacy skills, economic success and social outcomes like good health.

### **What does the study conclude?**

*Building on our Competencies* concludes with an analysis of a number of factors designed to explain why Canada’s 2003 literacy performance remained essentially the same as it had been in 1994. However the report says that much more analytical work need to be done before we will fully understand the lack of significant progress in the overall literacy performance of Canadian adults during that decade.

This study indicates that the results from the 2003 IALSS make it possible to take stock of the overall performance of Canadians and to determine if performance differs by jurisdiction, and within populations of special interest to Canadians. It shows that literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills are not evenly distributed in Canada.

For example, the average literacy, numeracy and problem solving scores of adults in the Yukon, Alberta, Saskatchewan and British Columbia are significantly higher than the national average. Scores in New Brunswick, Newfoundland / Labrador, and Nunavut are lower than the Canadian average in each of the four domains. Nova Scotia, the Northwest Territories, Manitoba, Ontario and Prince Edward Island have average scores that are not statistically different from the Canadian averages. In Quebec the average scores for the two literacy domains are below the national averages while in the numeracy and problem solving domains there is no difference.

At the same time the study concludes that there have been losses in literacy proficiency in certain sectors of society and several examples are used to illustrate this point. In most jurisdictions men outperform women in numeracy. In every province and territory at least two-thirds of seniors are at literacy Levels 1 and 2; which are relatively low literacy results when compared to those of other age groups. Canadians with university degrees have higher average prose literacy scores compared to those with a high school diploma.

There is a significant difference in prose literacy performance by official language group. In New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba more Francophones than Anglophones score below Level 3. The Aboriginal populations age 16 and over in urban Manitoba, urban Saskatchewan and in each of the territories have lower prose literacy proficiency than non-Aboriginal populations. This reflects the impact of lower levels of formal education and the use of a mother tongue other than English or French, the languages tested in this survey.

*Building on our Competencies* reports that while it is true that recent immigrants tend to be better educated than in the past, more come from countries where English or French are not mainstream languages. This helps to explain why recent immigrants between the ages of 16 and 65 perform significantly below the Canadian-born population on the literacy tests. Compared to the Canadian-born population, a higher percentage of recent and established immigrants aged 16 to 65 score below prose literacy Level 3.

The study also concludes that these kinds of unequal skills distributions could account for some inequalities in economic outcomes. For example, the 2003 IALSS results clearly indicate that literacy is associated with employability, the types of jobs occupied by workers, and level of earnings. Those with higher levels of skill have a higher employment rate and higher earnings. Those who work in more knowledge-intensive jobs have higher levels of literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills as well.

A range of social outcomes is also shown to have a relationship to literacy, although the causes and effects are unclear. The study concludes that those reporting poor health score lower on the document literacy scale compared to those reporting better health. Higher levels of prose literacy are associated with higher engagement in various community activities.

The issues surrounding low literacy are compounded when combined with other factors that affect day-to-day well-being. For example more than half of seniors, aged 65 and

older, report being in poor health and the average document literacy score for this group is at the lowest level on the literacy scales.

It is a widely held belief that strong literacy proficiency is the foundation for building and maintaining competencies throughout the life cycle. Those with low literacy proficiency are most at risk of being excluded from lifelong learning opportunities. The results show that, overall, about half of Canadians aged 16 to 65 participate in adult education and learning. However the participation rates for those at the lowest level of literacy drop to 20 percent. The study also concludes that in a society increasingly reliant on obtaining information through electronic means, familiarity with and the use of information and communications technologies is almost a necessity. Not surprisingly the survey shows that use of computers is lowest among those with low literacy.

While *Building on our Competencies* concludes that Canada still faces major literacy challenges ten years after the release of the IALS in 1994, the report observes there are reasons to be optimistic about our skills future. It notes that the majority of Canadians aged 16 to 65 have average prose and document literacy scores at Level 3, the skill level established as the minimum requirement for an individual to function effectively in a modern knowledge-based society and economy.

There was some good news reported in terms of international comparisons. Canadians outperformed their major North American trading partners, the United States and the Mexican State of Nuevo Leon. In fact the Yukon Territory, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia recorded quite high prose literacy scores that compare favourably with those of Norway, which had the highest average scores among countries involved in the 2003 survey. These provincial/territorial jurisdictions also scored above the Canadian average in all four skill domains, setting a standard of achievement for other Canadian jurisdictions.

### **Publication information**

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