

Background information on the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) is the first multi-country and multi-language assessment of adult literacy. IALS has developed scales of literacy performance so that literacy among people with a wide range of abilities can be compared across cultures and languages.

The first survey was conducted in 1994 in seven countries—Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. The results were published in December 1995 in a ground-breaking report called *Literacy, Economy and Society*. The Canadian results were published in September 1996 in *Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada*. Both reports shed light on the social and economic impacts of different levels of literacy, the underlying factors which cause them and how they might be amenable to policy intervention.

Since then, five more countries—Australia, Belgium (Flanders), Ireland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom—have joined the survey, bringing the total number of countries in IALS to twelve.

Survey results from all twelve countries are now being released in the second international publication entitled *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society*.

The international survey is managed by Statistics Canada in co-operation with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Key support has been given by the Educational Testing Service and the National Center for Education Statistics of the United States' Department of Education. In each participating country, a national study team was responsible for conducting the survey in conjunction with educational researchers. In Canada, the IALS was sponsored mainly by the National Literacy Secretariat and the Applied Research Branch both of Human Resources Development Canada.

Canada's pioneering role

The choice of Statistics Canada to design and manage the survey was a recognition of Canada's pioneering role in measuring literacy skills across languages and cultures. In 1989, Statistics Canada was commissioned by the National Literacy Secretariat to produce the first Canadian national literacy profile published as *Adult Literacy in Canada, Results of a National Study*. This survey successfully measured literacy skills in both the English and French populations in Canada. The National Adult Literacy Survey in the United States further refined our ability to test literacy skills. These surveys have advanced the understanding of literacy from the old notion that individuals are either literate or illiterate to the new concept of literacy as a continuum of skills ranging from quite limited to very high. IALS built on this new view of literacy, defining it as:

the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential.

Reading the results

The goal of the survey was not to rank countries from the most literate to the least literate. Rather, its aim was to compare, across cultures and languages, literacy performance among people with a wide range of abilities. Consequently, any direct comparisons across countries must incorporate an understanding of the social and economic characteristics of each country that underlie the observed literacy skill profiles. With this caveat, IALS makes it possible to place individual countries in the international literacy continuum.

Unlocking the global economy

The last decade has seen political and technological shifts that have caused social and economic upheaval worldwide. The economies of the OECD countries now face large, well-educated and relatively low-wage labour forces in newly competitive nations. At the same time, they are being presented with a limitless range of possibilities for co-operation and a wealth of fresh opportunities.

The emerging global economy is characterized by greatly increased flows of information and financial capital. The best way to exploit the new economic environment is to strengthen the capacity of firms and labour markets to adjust to change, improve their productivity and capitalize on innovation. But this capacity depends first and foremost on the knowledge and skills of the population. IALS shows that the literacy skills of individual citizens are a powerful determinant of a country's innovative and adaptive capacity.

Measuring literacy

Literacy cannot be narrowly defined as a single skill that enables people to deal with all types of text. People in industrialized countries face many different kinds of written material every day, and they require different skills to understand and use the information. To reflect this complexity, IALS assessed three categories of literacy:

1. **Prose literacy:** the ability to understand and use information from texts such as editorials, news stories, poems and fiction.
2. **Document literacy:** the ability to locate and use information from documents such as job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and graphs.
3. **Quantitative literacy:** the ability to perform arithmetic functions such as balancing a chequebook, calculating a tip, or completing an order form.

The specific literacy tasks designed for IALS were scaled by difficulty from 0 to 500 points. This range was subsequently divided into five broad literacy levels.

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| Level 1 | indicates very low literacy skills, where the individual may, for example, have difficulty identifying the correct amount of medicine to give to a child from the information found on the package. |
| Level 2 | respondents can deal only with material that is simple, clearly laid out and in which the tasks involved are not too complex. This is a significant category, because it identifies people who may have adapted their lower literacy skills to everyday life, but would have difficulty learning new job skills requiring a higher level of literacy. |
| Level 3 | is considered as the minimum desirable threshold in many countries but some occupations require higher skills. |
| Levels 4 and 5 | show increasingly higher literacy skills requiring the ability to integrate several sources of information or solve more complex problems. It appears to be a necessary requirement for some jobs. |

Between 2,000 and 3,000 adults (5,660 in Canada) in each of the 12 countries—Australia, Belgium, Canada, Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States—took part. All the respondents were tested in their national language(s) and in their own homes. The prose and document literacy scales were each based on 34 tasks and the quantitative literacy scale was derived from performance on a pool of 33 tasks. All the tasks were of varying difficulty. The attached sheets show some sample tasks, the levels and scores.

IALS reveals gaps in the “knowledge society”

If economies require increasing numbers of highly skilled workers to expand, then growth will be affected by existing practices of employers, individuals and governments. IALS has shown that instead of enlarging the pool of highly skilled workers, the tendency is to increase the skills of the already skilled. The reserve employment pool, made up of the unemployed and those currently working in declining industrial sectors, is low skilled. Policies directed towards providing more educational opportunities and increasing skills in that pool must be a necessary part of any industrial growth strategy.

Background

The distribution of literacy is also a good predictor of the magnitude of differences between social groups, making literacy an essential element for promoting social cohesion. Therefore, any view of literacy which is focussed on economic objectives alone is untenable.

This new report brings a wealth of new data to the table. This new data make it possible to test past conclusions and reinforce the results from the Canadian report entitled *Reading the Future: A portrait of literacy in Canada* and the results from *Literacy, Economy and Society*, both based on the first IALS study. The data are broken down by language, age, gender, and region. Most importantly, the report provides new information with which to assess Canadian policies on literacy, education and social and economic development. By opening a window on the life of Canadians and their international neighbours at home, in the community, and in the workplace, the report gives them a glimpse of their possible future.

The current study extends the analysis presented in these reports, bringing new insights into the economic and social importance of literacy in OECD countries.