

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARIES

LITERACY SKILLS FOR THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY: FURTHER RESULTS FROM THE INTERNATIONAL ADULT LITERACY SURVEY

What is this study about?

Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society was the second in a series of reports published to explain the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey or IALS. The first volume, *Literacy, Economy and Society*, was issued in 1995 and it contained initial findings from Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States. This second volume added data collected in 1996 on Australia, Flemish-speaking Belgium, Northern Ireland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. It was published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Statistics Canada (Statscan) in 1997.

Like the first, this second volume had two IALS objectives: to measure adult literacy skills on a set of comparable scales and to both describe and compare the literacy skills of adults from these countries across different cultures and languages.

Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society contained four chapters. The first outlines the overall levels of literacy proficiency levels in each of the participating countries highlighting the complex ways in which these distributions vary across countries.

Chapter two offers new evidence concerning the economic and wider social benefits of literacy. It ends with an analysis of the previously unrecognized contributions that literacy makes to productivity and earnings, quality of life, as well as to health and voluntary engagement in community activities. The chapter also presents findings on the return to human capital as measured by assessed literacy skills.

The third chapter examines the relationships between literacy and a range of individual characteristics such as home background, age and gender. It explores how interactions within families, schools and the workplace resulted in observable socio-economic differences in literacy scores.

Chapter four presents the results of an analysis of adults' readiness to learn in a variety of settings: formally in adult education institutions, non-formally in the workplace, as well as informally at home and in the community. The findings indicate that there are differences among countries due, for example, to the extent to which a culture of lifelong learning exists in a community.

There is a one-page “afterword” that is not presented as a formal chapter. Called “Policy Conclusions” it makes the case that literacy affects policy, or is affected by policy, across a broad number of issues including justice, health, youth and seniors, language and culture, social welfare, rural development, migration, employment, earnings and the competitiveness of individuals, firms and economies.

What are the questions addressed by the study?

As was the case with the first publication in the IALS series, the key questions for *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society* were how to define literacy and how to measure the impact of the knowledge society on skill requirements. The approach taken is to relate literacy to how an adult uses “...*printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential*”.

Accordingly IALS measured three types of literacy:

- ❖ 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
- ❖ Quantitative literacy (the knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations to numbers embedded in printed materials such as balancing a cheque-book, figuring out a tip or completing an order form, for example).

Each type of literacy was measured on a 500-point scale broken into five levels of skill (level 1 being the lowest, level 5 the highest). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) considers IALS level 3 to be the minimum level of literacy required to function effectively in a modern society and economy. The use of these three parallel scales made it possible to profile and to compare adult literacy skills across seven countries and between subgroups within those countries.

Why is this study important?

This study added further analysis to expand our knowledge about literacy and its impact on modern societies. It widened the scope of the research from the original seven countries to twelve, broadening the basis for comparative analysis and adding additional insights into literacy’s economic and social implications. The 12 twelve countries included in it represented roughly 7% of the world’s population at the time.

What does the study conclude?

This second study reaffirms the findings published in the initial IALS report *Literacy, Economy and Society*. It had found that there are important differences exist in adult literacy skills across the seven countries surveyed and that these differences are important both socially and economically.

Levels of literacy are strongly linked to life chances and well-being affecting employment stability, the incidence of unemployment and levels of income. Adults with low levels of literacy skills have lower economic prospects than those with higher levels of literacy. In North America and several European countries literacy scores on the quantitative scale show the strongest correlation with income. There is a large “wage premium” in Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States for those whose level of proficiency is at the highest level (4/5).

The IALS found that the role literacy plays in the determination of wages is greater in economies that are more flexible and open. This finding has a number of implications for governments and employers suggesting that countries cannot depend solely on their educational systems to produce the skills evolving societies and economies require. They also need to ensure that adequate learning opportunities are available to those economically or socially at risk because of their low skills. This suggests that educational attainment is a poor proxy for skill, and that economies differ greatly with regards to skills demanded. Furthermore, this report concludes, experience and skills are rewarded differently in different OECD countries.

In addition, *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society* added more substance to the earlier observation that literacy and educational attainment are not the same thing. Naturally people with higher levels of education tend to have higher levels of literacy skills. Nevertheless those with lower levels of education can develop higher levels of literacy skill after their schooling is over through their own efforts and behaviour. IALS found that schooling provides no more than “a start in life” when it comes to acquiring literacy skills, although it provides a more effective start in some countries than in others.

The authors of this report also concluded that literacy outcomes vary considerably according to socio-economic status but that is true in only some but not all countries investigated. Most countries seek to diminish social disparity in economic opportunities, nevertheless it seems clear that youth from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds perform more poorly than their education and experience would suggest. Not only is this unfair, the authors observe, but there is a large cost to society in terms of revenue foregone and higher social assistance requirements.

Finally *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society* explains how literacy acquisition and population skills profiles are sensitive to policy interventions in a wide array of domains. Some of these impacts are indirect, like the levying of user fees on libraries or taxes on reading materials that can be an impediment to the exercise of literacy skills. It notes that low literacy levels can have an impact on the health, income and socio-economic status of families. It argues for policies that favour literacy and learning rich environments in the home, at work and in the community. It concludes by saying that only if social, economic and education policies converge in their attention to literacy issues will countries be able to develop true cultures of lifelong learning for all.

Publication information

Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society: Further Results from the International Adult Literacy Survey

Published by Statistics Canada (Ottawa), Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development or OECD: Paris and Ottawa, 1997

ISBN 92-64-15624-0194 pages

Version 2