

EAEA Analysis paper

**PIAAC - OECD Survey of Adult Skills:
A WAKE-UP CALL FOR EUROPE!**



**EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS**



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I. Introduction

The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) welcomes the launch of the results of Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) on the 8th of October. PIAAC clearly demonstrates that Europe needs to invest in adult education – it is a loud wake-up call to Europe and the member states to start acting NOW.

EAEA hopes that the PIAAC results will lead to a European-wide debate on the skills and competences of adults, raise awareness and increase investment in adult learning. The assessment proves the requirement for continuous learning in Europe, underlining “a strong positive relationship between participation in adult education and skills proficiency” (*Skilled for life? Key Findings from the Survey of Adult Skills, OECD, p.16*). We need a ‘Learning Europe’ where everyone can and want to participate in learning. The PIAAC publication states that “While countries cannot change the past, policies designed to provide high-quality lifelong opportunities for learning can help to ensure that the adults of the future maintain their skills” (OECD, p.13).

Some key findings:

- PIAAC shows that in average 20 % of the EU adult population have low literacy and numeracy skills. Urgent action is needed to improve literacy across Europe.
- The skills of a person tend to decline over the years if they are not used frequently. PIAAC proves that the gap in literacy proficiency between generations is getting wider. The level and distribution of skills differs markedly across countries, within countries and between generations.
- PIAAC clearly demonstrates the need to encourage and empower disadvantaged adults to improve their proficiency and EAEA agrees that it takes innovative approaches, community involvement as well as investment to reach out to disadvantaged learners.

We believe that adult education is the key for more knowledge, skills, competences and social and civic participation in Europe. It has the potential to increase competitiveness and employability but also democracy, inclusion, health and wellbeing. At the end of the document we provide a set of scenarios that threaten Europe unless these issues are tackled and recommend actions to overcome them.

II. Maintaining skills and competences during a lifetime

The PIAAC results clearly demonstrate that reading, numeracy and especially digital skills decline over the age span if they are not continuously practiced and nurtured.

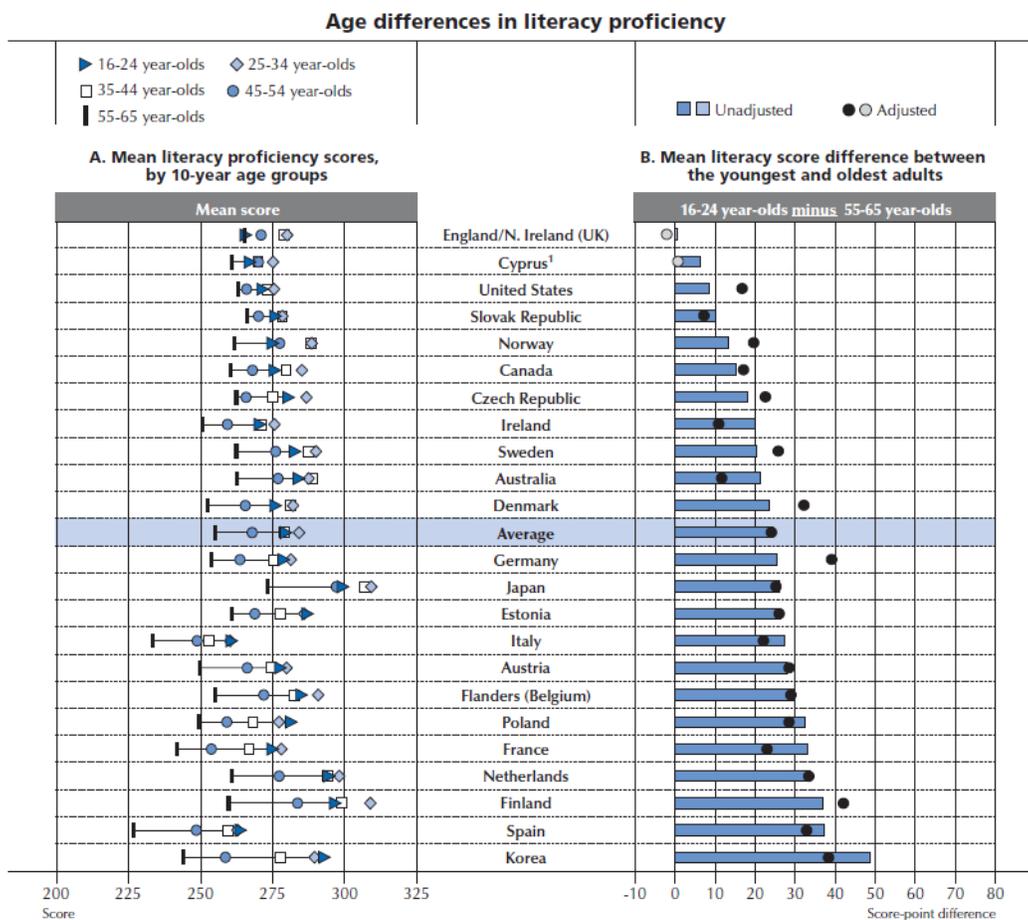


Figure 1: OECD, Skills Outlook 2013, First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills, p. 107

While we have to take changes in education systems (professionalisation, access to education, integration, diversity, learner centeredness etc.) into consideration, there are two factors we would like to underline specifically. The English saying ‘use it or lose it’ explains in simple terms one of the main problems with literacy and numeracy – even people who once had the skills and knowledge are prone to forget them if they’re not used regularly. This phenomenon is quite well known from literacy training (in developing countries) – if people who have learned how to read and write do not have access to books, newspapers and other texts or do not use these skills regularly, there is a high chance that they will forget their skills. The PIAAC study links the use of skills at work to their maintenance and this is indeed

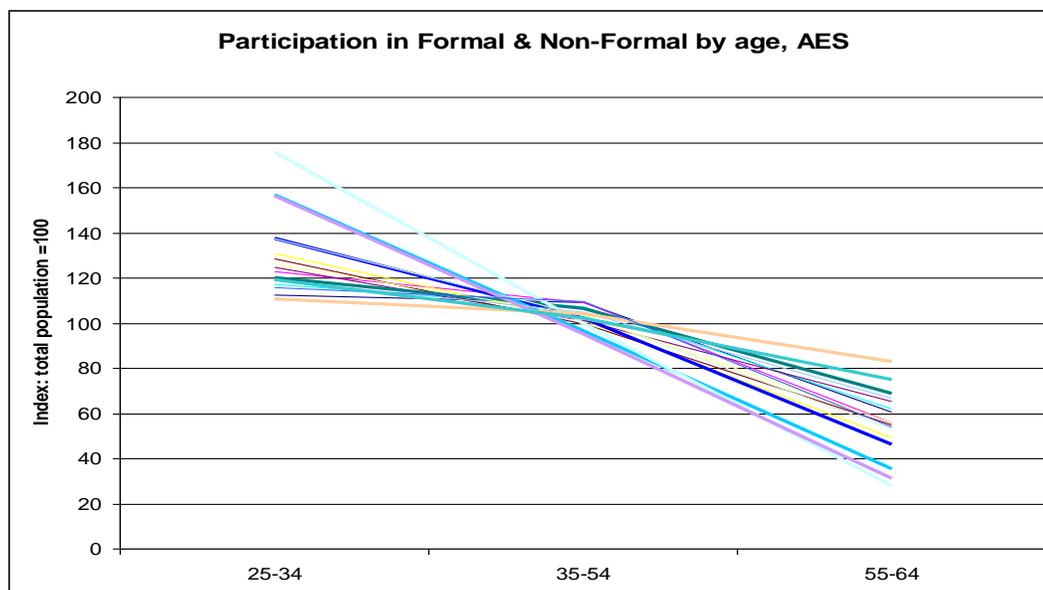
an important point. Additionally, we believe that we need a comprehensive effort to become learning societies in Europe.

EAEA regrets that the PIAAC study limits the age of people tested at 64 as we believe that skills and competences are important throughout one's life. Our work on active aging and older learners shows that we have to go beyond working age in order to achieve all the benefits of adult learning both for individuals and for societies across one's lifetime. Nevertheless, the PIAAC results give an indication of skills developments over people's lifetime:

The findings show that, in most countries, there is a close relationship between proficiency in the information processing skills assessed and age. Literacy proficiency, for example, typically peaks among 25-34 year-olds and is lowest among those over 55 [...].

There are probably other factors at work that account for this gap. One may be the differences among countries in the opportunities available to adults to further develop and maintain their key information-processing skills, either through education and training or in the course of their working lives. Information-processing skills can be lost as well as maintained and enhanced. The relationship between the presence or absence of opportunities to further develop proficiency – whether they are in the education system, at work or in other contexts – and the level of proficiency is likely to be mutually reinforcing. A lack of such opportunities can create age-related inequities and a vicious cycle of exclusion from skills-related development activities, as people grow older. Thus, developing and maintaining skills over a lifetime is likely to depend not only on how well developed adult learning systems are in different countries, but also how work is stratified and organised among different socio-demographic groups. (OECD, Skills Outlook, 2013, p. 105-106)

The **Adult Education Survey**, too, demonstrates that participation in adult learning decreases with age:



This development is mirrored and linked to the investment in adult learning. The British Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (Schuller, Watson, 2009) found the following data for the UK, which we can use as an example:

Weighted participation ratios across the four life stages:

	18 – 24	25 – 49	50 – 74	75 +
Formal learning	3.250	225	27	5.5
Informal learning	325	90	27	5.5

Source: Schuller and Watson

The expenditure on formal and informal learning mirrors the participation.

Expenditure on formal and informal learning across the four life stages:

	18 – 24	25 – 49	50 – 74	75 +
Total expenditure (£ millions)	£ 47.141	£ 6.057	£ 1.397	£ 285
Percentage of total expenditure	86 %	11 %	2,5 %	0,5 %

Source: Sabates, 2008

These tables clearly show that there's a dramatic drop both in participation and investment the higher the age group gets. The Inquiry recommends – and EAEA fully concurs – that even some small shifts of funds towards the groups especially 75+ and 50 – 74 will have an enormous impact on learning opportunities for more mature adults.

It is obvious that more efforts, support, knowledge, outreach and funding are needed so that older people can and will participate in learning. We therefore call for specific attention to the age groups of 50+ when it comes to adult learning. Demographic forecasts demonstrate the need to prepare for a growing number of old and very old people in Europe on the one hand, and retirement age limits are set to increase, too.

The digital gap over generations

The biggest difference in competences across age groups is, not unexpectedly, in digital competences.

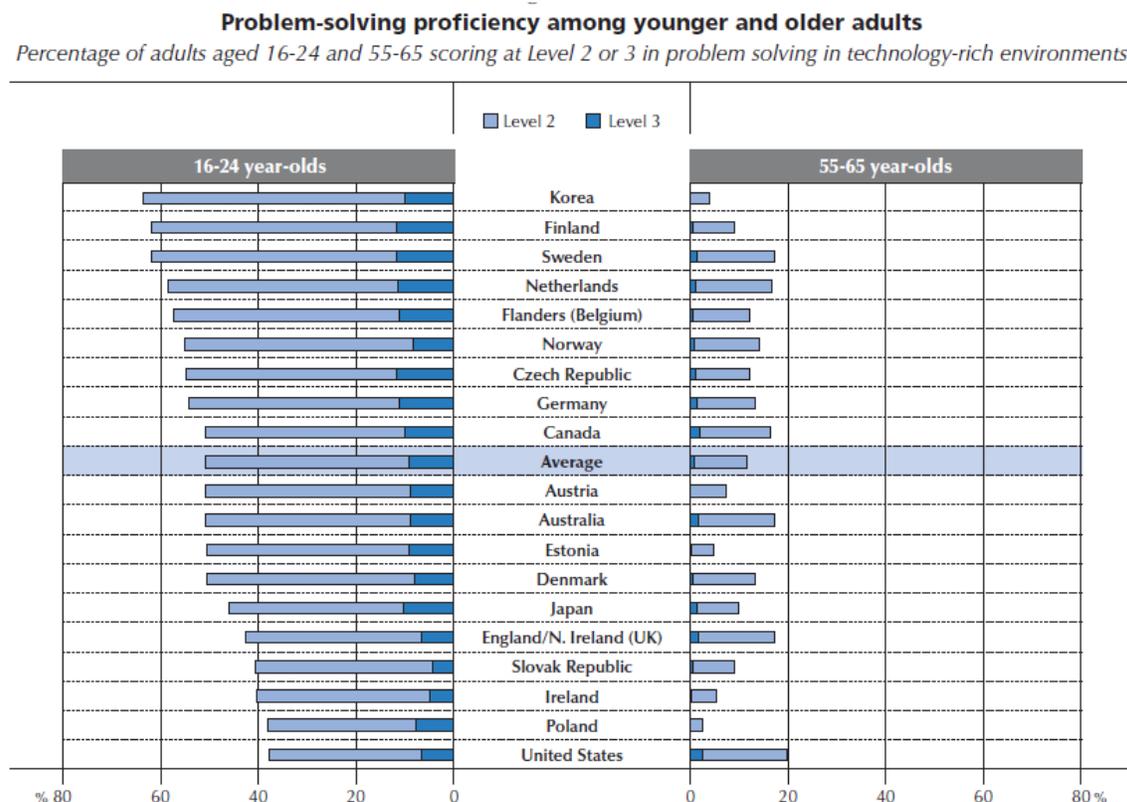


Figure 2: OECD, Skills Outlook 2013, First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills, p. 108

Participating in society in Europe increasingly depends on digital access – from e-forms and e-governments, to online shopping and electronic communication, access to computers and the internet become more and more important. EAEA believes that digitalization for ‘older’ learners should be a key part of lifelong learning policies. ICT strategies and policies should proactively target the generation over 45, not forgetting seniors. IT equipment, curricula and training methods have to be tailored to the needs of and be in line with the life interests of the older learners. Many good practice examples in intergenerational learning have involved ICT skills and a transfer of these innovations is very desirable.

III. Low-skilled migrants as a main target group

EAEA believes that working to engage migrant groups in adult education must be a priority as it means working towards a just and inclusive society. EAEA is working towards this goal with [the OED Network](#), based on four concepts that are of utmost relevance for this kind of work: diversity, outreach, empowerment and active citizenship.

How integration becomes difficult

PIAAC found that in most countries, immigrants with a foreign-language background have significantly lower proficiency in literacy and numeracy than native-born adults. The problem is exacerbated for foreign-language immigrants who come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and who therefore have nearly seven times the odds of scoring at that level at Level 2 or below on the literacy scale compared to a non-immigrant from a more advantaged background.

As a result: When low educational attainment is combined with poor proficiency in the language of the host country, integration into the society becomes difficult. Therefore EAEA agrees that there is a need to consider ways to support immigrants in learning. PIAAC found that these efforts and achievements in this regard vary significantly between the countries:

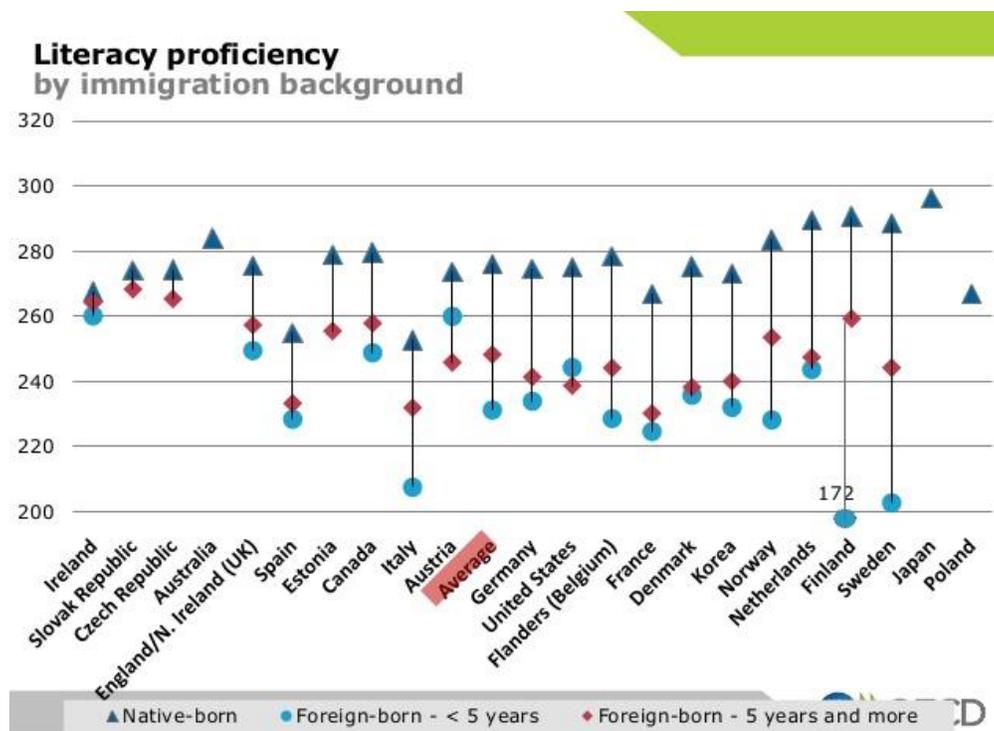


Figure 3: Schleicher, 2013, slide 20

Learning is not simply a matter of time

According to PIAAC; adults who have lived less than five years in the host country score lower on the literacy competences than those who have lived in the host country for more than five years. This would suggest an improvement over the length of time due to incentives, support structures and learning opportunities. However: in most countries the time elapsed since immigrants arrived appears to make little difference to their literacy and numeracy competences. There might be several reasons for this: incentives to learn are not strong or those policies that encourage learning the languages of the receiving country are of limited effectiveness.

On the contrary, PIAAC also shows positive examples and countries (Finland, Sweden and Norway) where the length of time that these persons have been living in the host country makes a significant difference: literary levels improve. Among other explanations (immigration policies, changes in the number, countries-of-origin and original language of immigrants, etc) EAEA accounts this positive development with the long tradition adult learning in these countries. Well established adult learning systems offer high learning incentives and supportive structures as well as the availability and support for learning opportunities that are designed for immigrants and other vulnerable groups.

Make lifelong learning opportunities accessible to all

As a result, PIAAC clearly demonstrates the urgency and improved efforts to encourage migrants to participate in learning. EAEA agrees that it takes innovative approaches, community involvement as well investment to reach out to and support migrant learners. Therefore the aforementioned OED network found that, in combination with effective outreach methods, learner-centred and empowering methodologies as well as local non-formal learning opportunities are successful in reaching a high number of migrants. An integrated national and local approach is needed to address the needs of migrant communities. EAEA underlines the importance of simultaneously acting at various levels in a coherent way: guidance and counselling are important and governments (national and local), stakeholders and providers need to make sure that there will be appropriate courses. In combination with campaigns and promotion, we need investment in learning infrastructure and adult education staff, as well as training and courses. Appropriate policy strategies need to be followed by implementation including the main stakeholders.

IV. Adult education and democracy

Can we draw a simple correlation between literacy and democracy? Are low-skilled people more prone to undemocratic groups than others? No, it's not that easy, but the PIAAC results nevertheless raise important issues. We believe that these issues have a particular resonance in a year of European elections.

The PIAAC study presents some indicators for citizenship and democracy. Trust is one of them:

“Trust is the bedrock of democracy. Without trust in others and in the rule of law, all relationships, whether business, political or social, function less efficiently. The foundations of trust are established on three complementary levels: trust as an individual trait, trust as a relationship, and trust as a cultural rule (Sztompka, 1999). For an individual, certain skills may lead to trust in others. For example, key information-processing skills may enable people to understand better the motives and aspirations of others and the conditions under which these may be shown. Skills may also enable people to forge trust by fostering lasting relationships with the aim of accomplishing mutually rewarding outcomes” (OECD; 2013, p. 237 f)

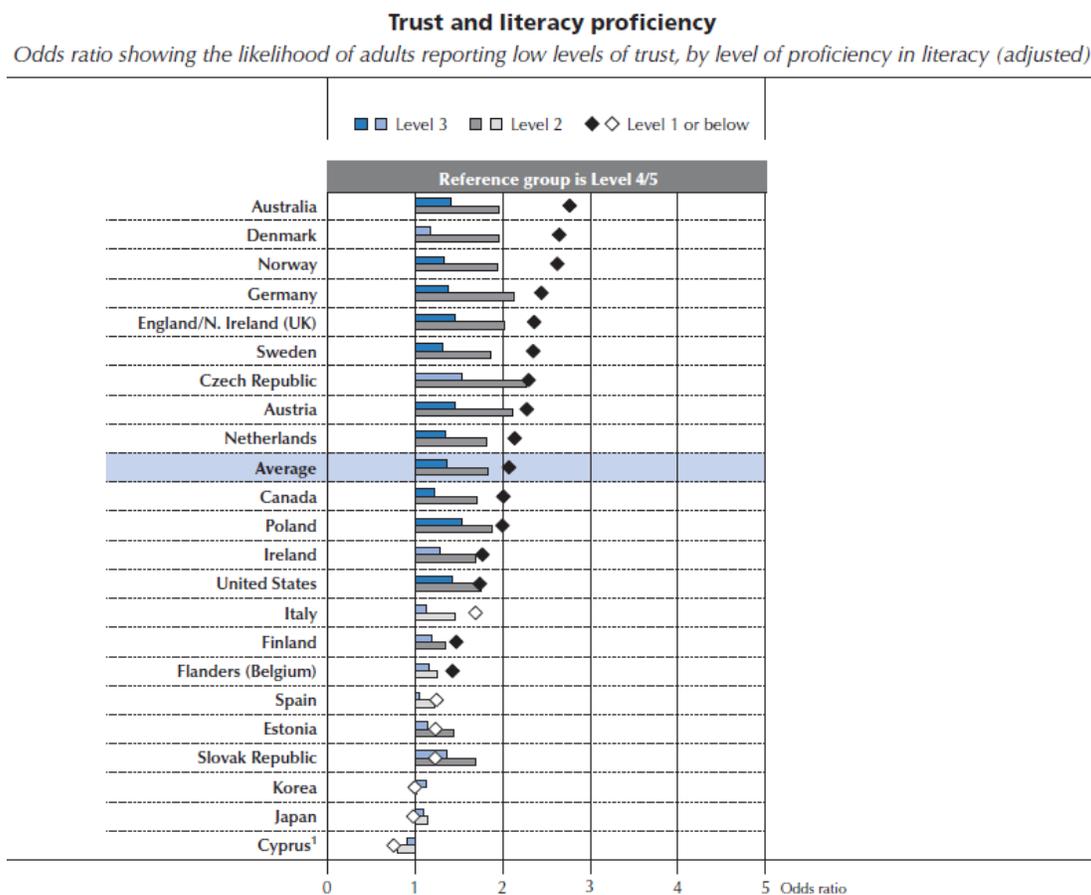


Figure 4: OECD, Skills Outlook 2013, First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills, p. 238

Again, the causes and targets of trust are too complex to analyse with PIAAC, but a clear relation between trust and literacy levels can be drawn.

A second indication for democracy and citizenship is ‘political efficacy’, i.e. the belief of individuals that they have an influence on their surroundings – the belief, in short, that they can make a difference.

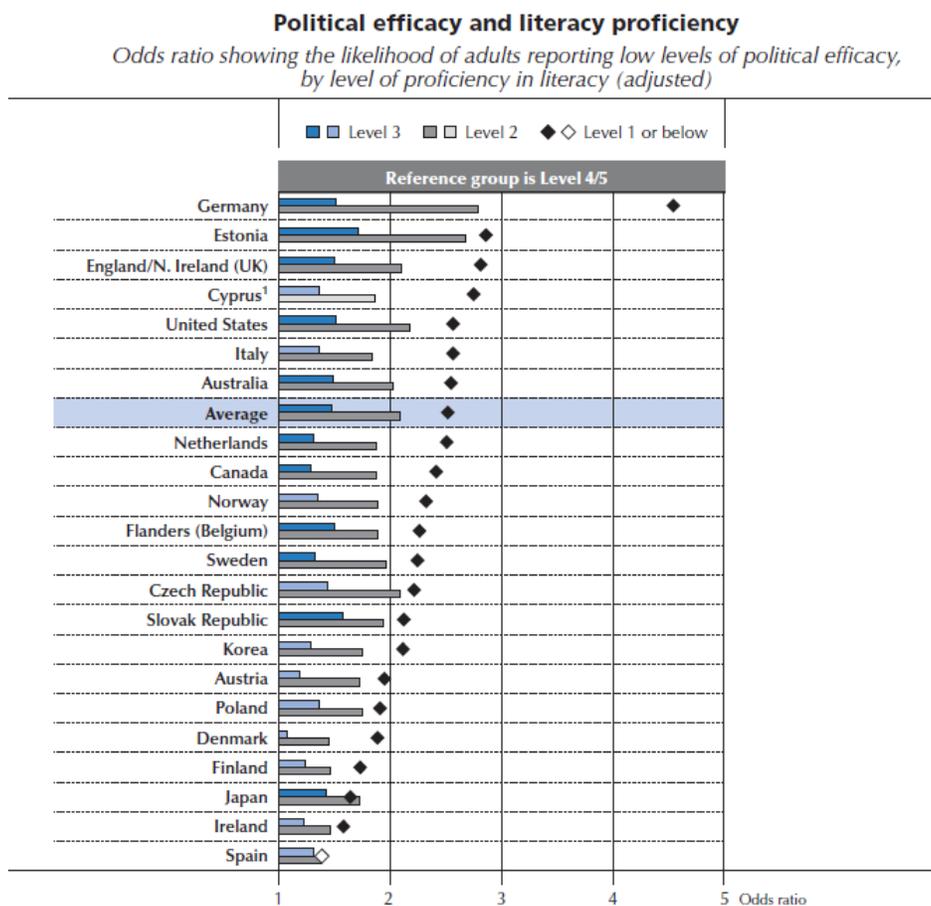


Figure 5: OECD, Skills Outlook 2013, First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills, p. 204

The difference between Level 3 and Level 1 are quite striking in almost all of the countries. Previous studies have shown the impact of adult education (summary from the [BeLL website](#)).

Civic participation and civic and social engagement

Feinstein et al. (2008) argue that education can have a positive influence on societal cohesion and citizenship. Regarding societal cohesion, the main contributions of education are greater trust, more civic co-operation and lower levels of violent crime. Additionally, the individual engagement in education is a predictor of engagement in public life because “the more students are engaged in their education, the more willing they are, on average, to play a positive role in public life” (p. 20). Adult education leads moreover to an increase in racial tolerance and a greater likelihood of voting. Preston (2004) analyzed the impact of adult education on participants’ civic lives and on the formation of values, particularly tolerance. He found that learning can have an impact on informal and formal civic participation. Concerning informal civic participation, it has helped individuals to build, maintain, dismantle, reconstruct and enrich their social networks. Additionally, the formation of values can be influenced by learning. For example changes in tolerance, understanding and respect were reported by respondents. Civic and social engagement (CSE) as learning outcome has been analyzed by the OECD (2007). Four factors of learning that foster CSE have been identified: content, development of competences, cultivating values, attitudes, beliefs and motivations, and increasing social status. However more years in education do not automatically mean higher levels of CSE. There are more variables, such as curriculum, school ethos, and pedagogy that shape CSE. But learning environments that lay stress on responsibility, open dialogue, respect and application of theory and ideas in practical and group-oriented work seem to be more successful in fostering CSE than other forms of learning.

Attitude Change

It was found (Feinstein et al, 2003) that adult learning is associated with more “open-minded” perspectives on race and authority, greater understanding of people from different backgrounds, challenging previously held beliefs and with a sustaining effect on non-extremist views. Especially academic oriented courses are most suited for opening minds and generally link adult learning to increased racial tolerance, a reduction in political cynicism and a higher inclination towards democratic attitudes.

European societies are becoming more complex, and generally, there are no simple solutions to political problems. Populist parties present simple answers and in order to be able to see behind these strategies, Europe needs people that can read and understand more complex contexts. This is especially true for the European level and the European institutions. As Europe gets ready for the next European elections, it is in the interest of democracy and European cohesion that we boost the access to adult education.

V. How adult learning benefits lives

Besides through democratic structures, lifelong learning benefits societies by impacting individuals' well-being. Until recently, much of the evidence on the benefits of adult learning was anecdotal, even aspirational. However, while there were serious studies of the benefits of schooling, further and higher education, relatively little attention had been paid to the benefits of learning in adult lives. Only in the last years, a growing body of research in the area of benefits of adult learning has been undertaken.

PIAAC offers data available for direct measures of skills and the social outcomes, and shows that in nearly all countries adults with low proficiency and low levels of education show the lowest probability of reporting positive social outcomes. Individuals with lower literacy skills are more likely to report poor health, to believe that they have little impact on political processes, and less likely participate in associative or volunteer activities. In most countries, they are also less likely to trust others.

As mentioned above, on average across countries, individuals who perform at Level 1 in literacy are twice as likely to report low levels of trust into themselves, others, policy making, society and the labour market as individuals who score at Level 4 or 5. According to PIAAC, adults with lower levels of skills in literacy are more likely to report having a fair to poor health than those with higher proficiency¹.

Further research by EAEA and others (such as [the BELL study](#)) found that adults who participate in one or two courses are 13 percent more likely to vote. Adult learning can help substantially to reduce poverty and has an empowering role in times of crisis, providing a stable community, a chance for reorientation, a safe place and social recognition. The literature reveals that educational attainment in one generation has positive effects in the next generation. Also four-fifths of learners reported a positive impact on areas such as confidence and life satisfaction. Consequently, PIAAC also shows that adults with higher literacy levels and high levels of education have the highest probability of reporting positive social outcomes.

Another important finding of PIAAC is that, in some cases, literacy proficiency seems to be more important for social outcomes than having a high level of education. For example, in Canada, adults with low levels of education but higher proficiency are more likely to report better health and volunteering activities than adult with high levels of education but lower literacy levels.

PIAAC proves that participation in adult education remains unequal. The pattern that emerges in PIAAC is clear and in line with the findings of previous surveys (e.g. the International Adult Literacy Survey and the Adult Literacy Life Skills Survey): adults from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds have higher scores on average than those from disadvantaged backgrounds (socio-economic background is

¹ Any result concerning health has a potentially huge impact on health costs. Just one example: Long-term care homes for the elderly report a decrease in medication of up to 50% after the introduction of learning opportunities.

proxied by parents' educational attainment).² And systems also reinforce initial social disparities: in the way that access to training may be related to social background.

Those who are already higher skilled and literate are more likely to access and get training, therefore benefit more. Despite many efforts, those who are already disadvantaged, are less likely to participate in adult learning and therefore to improve their skills through adult education and training activities. Because of that they are at a greater risk of experiencing difficulties in the labour market. Low-skilled adults risk getting trapped in a situation in which they rarely benefit from adult learning, and their skills remain weak or deteriorate over time – which makes it even harder for these individuals to participate in learning activities. However research (NIACE 2008) shows that in particular disadvantaged groups, report the most powerful outcomes of adult learning. Through learning they feel more in control of their lives and more confident about participating in society.

In some countries, improvements in access to and the quality of education for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds have weakened the relationship between socio-economic background and skills proficiency. For example through offered learning opportunities tailored to the needs of the learners and encouraging disadvantaged adults to improve their proficiencies.

² “Adults who have low levels of education and whose parents also had low levels of education have, on average across countries, nearly five times the odds of scoring at lower levels of proficiency on the literacy scale than adults whose parents had higher levels of education” (OECD, 2013, p.122)

VI. Why we need to become a learning society

EAEA, together with its members and stakeholders, has long recognized that adult education can make a contribution to increasing social, economic and personal wellbeing. However we experienced that the lack of evidence on the benefits of adult education, especially those not linked directly to the labour market, is a major obstacle in gaining recognition for a sustainable framework and reliable support for the sector.

Therefore EAEA agrees with the results of the PIAAC that wider skills are often neglected, but have essential implications for the wellbeing including self-esteem and increased social interaction of individuals and society. The impact of skills and learning goes far beyond earnings and employment. A focus on these outcomes understates the role that adult learning can play in the lives of individuals and communities. Therefore EAEA believes that investment in education and training can be encouraged if the benefits of improving their skills are made apparent.

There are a number of needs for European societies when it comes to adult learning:

- We need to encourage everyone to participate in learning activities (formal, non-formal or informal)
- We need to enable everyone to be able to participate in learning activities
- We need the appropriate infrastructure that makes it possible for everyone to participate in learning (e.g. libraries and/or adult education centres and/or community centres that offer reading materials, computer and internet access, cultural activities and adult education on a local level) and which also enable everyone to enjoy a mixture of non- and informal learning as well as support for it.

By providing tools, support and a safe environment, these local centres can drive the learning, digital and cultural activities of all in their neighbourhoods, as well as working as a community meeting place, which will also help with outreach of marginalized groups.

Community based lifelong learning centres can simultaneously provide instantiations of a range of key lifelong learning objectives, such as active citizenship, social cohesion/inclusion, personal and social fulfillment, intercultural dialogue, as well as employment pathways. In other words, a notable potential they offer is as a kind of one-stop-shop for a wide number of core lifelong learning objectives of the European Council and Commission. Community learning centres offer a potentially key pathway and bridge in providing outreach to marginalized communities, including to ethnic minorities, and also connection over time between the non-formal and formal system. As is evident from a range of centres across different European countries, the

community based location and proximity is an advantage in being able to engage with hard to reach groups who have tended to be alienated from the formal system³. (Downes, p.27)

We need greater awareness of informal learning (and its recognition and validation) so that everyone can participate in a range of learning activities.

Learning is everybody's business

On these grounds, the survey results offer vital insights for policy makers towards increasing and maintaining investment in skills and adult learning. EAEA is aware that in periods of economic (and other) crisis and when public budgets are tight, governments tend to cut investments in human capital first. However EAEA agrees with the OECD that cutting investment in skills and learning at such times may be short-sighted. The results from PIAAC also underline the need to move from a focus on initial education towards fostering lifelong learning. This change has to include a broad range of stakeholders, actors and policy areas: employers and companies, national and regional governments, NGOs, adult education institutions, CSOs, individuals etc.

Overall, EAEA agrees with the PIAAC results suggesting that adult learning and improvements in the teaching of literacy and numeracy results has considerable economic and social benefits for individuals and for society a whole. There is still a call for a holistic attitude towards education's benefits, in addition to qualifications, certifications and economic benefits, acknowledging that education often produces impact in learner's homes, workplaces and communities. Learning outside the formal education needs to be sufficiently recognized.

VII. EAEA Recommendations: WAKE-UP CALL FOR EUROPE!

Based on the PIAAC results, EAEA recognizes three scenarios that Europe faces unless these issues are tackled. We see adult education having a key role in overcoming these challenges and thus offer a set of recommended actions.

1. Scenario: Europe of unequally skilled adults

PIAAC shows that in average 20 % of the EU adult population have low literacy and numeracy skills. Literacy as a continuum is the most significant foundation for an active participation in a rapidly changing society. Urgent action is needed to improve literacy across Europe and prevent the divide between generations.

³ Community Based Lifelong Learning Centres: Developing a European Strategy. Informed by International Evidence and Research. Research Paper for European Commission Network of Experts on the Social Aspects of Education and Training (NESET), (2011)

EAEA recommended actions

- **Increased public investment in adult learning!** Public investment in adult education and learning is crucial especially for those who left initial education without any qualifications and those who are living in poor households.
- **Campaigns underlining the personal and social benefits of non-formal learning!** We call on all politicians, policy makers, social partners and companies to reflect on European-wide and national campaigns to promote lifelong learning across Europe. The campaigns should underline the social benefits of adult education, such as improved health, social cohesion, higher self-esteem, active citizenship and wellbeing.
- **Cooperation between different stakeholders!** In order to tackle the European-wide problem of low literacy among persons of all ages, close cooperation between governmental and civil society organisations is needed to raise awareness, develop appropriate measures and make use of the synergies of all social actors. A number of actors need to contribute more to adult learning in Europe:
 - a. **Social partners:** Both employers' and employees' representatives can be a driving force in the education and training of workers.
 - b. **Companies:** Skilled workers, whose competencies are kept up-to-date and who have a chance to develop professionally within their company, are the main assets of firms. Companies that invest in training and education have a much higher chance to survive and prosper in the competitive markets today.
 - c. **Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs):** Investing in training is often a challenge for SMEs (limited time, personal and financial resources). EAEA would like to underline that there are many good practice examples for solutions to such problems. We propose an increased and strategic dissemination of these good practices among SMEs. Even and especially for SMEs, education and training can make a big difference for their competitiveness.

2. Scenario: Europe of socially excluded groups

PIAAC found that in most countries, immigrants with a foreign-language background have significantly lower proficiency in literacy and numeracy than native-born adults. Low educational attainment combined with poor proficiency in the language of the host country can hinder integration into the society. PIAAC also shows a close relationship between the information processing skills and age. Europe thus faces a threat of socially excluded groups.

EAEA recommended actions

- **‘One size does not fit all’ approach!** Learning offers should be tailor-made so that they are relevant to the groups concerned. Different under-represented groups may need special measures to attract them back to learning (e.g. migrants, older people, prisoners, etc.). Innovative and successful projects set up to attract particular groups are often short lived because of short-term funding and the methodologies not being mainstreamed.
- **Attention to older learners!** Special attention should be paid to the age groups of 50 + when it comes to adult learning. In the future, Europeans will live and work longer, therefore more efforts, support, knowledge, outreach and funding are needed so that older people can and will participate in learning. Research also shows that liberal adult education helps to reduce health care costs.
- **Ensuring that adults can go “One step up”!** We call for an initiative that will qualify a certain number or percentage of the population to secondary-level schooling. It is essential that possibilities for adults to go one step up in terms of qualifications become a permanent feature of adult education and training, so as to enable social mobility and the growth of competence, particularly for individuals with low qualifications.

3. Scenario: Europe of passive citizens

The biggest difference in competences across age groups is in digital competences, especially among older learners. In order to ensure active citizenship and the participation of all groups, especially as Europe gets ready for the next elections, it is in the interest of democracy and European cohesion that we boost the access to adult education.

EAEA recommended actions

- **Provide access to and skills for ICT!** We call for future E-inclusion through collaboration and education with the pedagogy to recognise individual needs as key ingredients. With the ever-increasing use of computers and “smart devices”, a significant number of citizens are becoming isolated for lack of access, lack of knowledge or for disinterest. Adult education can bridge the digital divide.
- **Structural support for non-formal adult education providers!** Non-formal adult learning often works better for many learners because it can be much more flexible in responding to learners’ needs and interests than formal education. Strengthening non-formal adult education can increase participation and drive learning motivation (see the example of the

Nordic countries). Participating in learning activities can provide a stable time framework, a community, a chance for re-orientation, a safe place, a new challenge, social recognition, and end up being an important tool for empowerment.

- **Real lifelong learning systems in Europe!** More exchanges and more equality between formal, non-formal and informal education and learning should be supported. The integration of informal and non-formal learning in National Qualification Frameworks is a crucial development. EAEA recommends setting up an integrated system with an emphasis on recognition of prior learning as well as individual education and training courses.

Successful adult learning can provide real progress for the further development of European countries, bringing people together, increasing the skills and competences of adults and consequently supporting their participation and success in the society.

VIII. Sources

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